

EDIBLE GARDENING

Wrapping Up the Warm-Season Garden

by Jo Ellen Meyers Sharp

The winter holidays are nearly upon us, but there are always a few things left to do in the food garden. For those of us in temperate regions, a few tasks completed now mean our vegetable garden will be ready when the spring gardening bug bites and you want to plant potatoes, peas, lettuces, and other greens. And those who live in mild-winter regions are lucky enough to be harvesting or even planting.

KEEP HARVESTING

Some of the last plants to remain in the vegetable garden are carrots, parsnips, cabbages, and spinach. If you live in an area subject to frost and have plants still growing, protect them with a row cover, tunnel, or about 12 inches of straw. Move aside the covering to harvest the veggies through winter. A few plants also can be grown in poly tunnels or cold frames for winter. This works well for collards, kale, and other hardy greens.

CLEAN UP ELSEWHERE

Vegetable plants free of insects or diseases can be cut at the base or pulled and composted. Tomatoes, peppers, and others in the nightshade family (*Solanaceae*) are very prone to fungal diseases, so it's best to pull those and dispose of them in the trash or yard waste, if your community offers it. This is another reason to rotate crops regularly if you have space.

Cut the foliage of perennial vegetables and herbs like horseradish, rhubarb, and asparagus to the ground once they turn yellow or have been killed by a hard frost. Horseradish roots can be harvested in early fall. Apply about a one-inch layer of mulch, chopped leaves, or compost around the base of these plants to keep weeds down.

Perennial herbs, such as mint, thyme, chives, and sage, can be left upright or



Crops like leeks and kale can withstand cold and snow and be harvested through winter.

cut back based on your preference. In milder regions, chives and sage may remain evergreen, or nearly so, and can be harvested through the winter.

FRUITS AND BERRIES

Raspberry and blackberry canes can be left unpruned until spring. Blueberries also are pruned in spring. At this time, though, you can remove any crossed, diseased or dead branches on these and other fruit-produc-

ing plants. Apply a one-inch layer of compost or chopped leaves around the plants.

Clean up fallen apples and other fruits and leaves around trees to reduce disease or insect problems. Apply about a one-inch layer of mulch or other organic matter around the base of the tree. Make sure trees are watered regularly until the ground freezes, especially if summer and fall have been dry. Dead branches can be removed from fruit trees but hold off on other pruning until the trees are fully dormant.

PATROL FOR WEEDS

Winter annual weeds, such as henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*) and Persian speedwell (*Veronica persica*), can germinate beginning late fall and early winter. These weeds survive the winter, grow, bloom, and set seed in spring.

Resources

Purdue University's Cover Crops in the Home Garden, <https://tinyurl.com/m5nz5479>.
State-by-State List of Soil Testing Labs, <https://tinyurl.com/yp6danpa>.



Hoing or pulling weeds when they are tiny reduces weeding chores in spring.

TEST YOUR SOIL

If it's been a few years since you've had your vegetable garden soil tested, now is a good time to test it again. Food plants take a lot of nutrients from the soil, so it's good to check periodically.

The test will tell you what nutrients the soil has or is missing, what the pH level is, and what remedies you can use. Check with your county Extension office to see if they do soil tests or can recommend reputable private soil testing facilities.

COVER UP

After completing clean up, cover the soil in your vegetable garden with a two- to three-inch layer of organic matter to prevent erosion, reduce weed seed germination, and protects the soil from being compacted by rain.

Chopped leaves, leaf mold, compost, or a cover crop like hairy vetch or winter wheat all provide good cover through the winter. Cover crops, known as "living mulch," protect the soil while improving its structure, fixing nitrogen, nourishing microorganisms, and adding nutrients. Your Extension office can recommend suitable cover crops for your region.

Although some gardeners wait until spring to replenish the soil, doing it in fall means the bed will be ready to go when you are. Replenishing now also encourages the development of beneficial soil organisms, such as fungi, microbes, and earthworms, which aerate and enrich the soil.

TAKE A SEAT

Once you've put the garden to bed, it's time to reflect and make notes on what worked and what didn't in the food garden. Was it the variety, the weather, insects, or disease that plagued a plant? Should you try it again? Make a list of what edibles you'd like to grow again, and you'll be ready when the mail order catalogs arrive or when you log into nursery websites. Don't forget to try something new. ■

Jo Ellen Meyers Sharp, a popular speaker, is an award-winning writer and editor who blogs at hoosiergardener.com. She gardens in Indianapolis, Indiana.



Above: A cover crop of field peas in this vegetable garden will be tilled into the soil in spring to provide nutrients for a new growing season. **Left:** Collecting a soil sample for testing.