

Spend Time Now for a Gorgeous Garden Next Spring

This year's gardening season may be coming to an end, but savvy gardeners know that fall is a great time to start preparing for next year's growing season. Taking the time now for review, assessment and some possible changes can lead to big improvements next year.

Look at your landscape with a critical eye. Walk about your property taking notes as you go recording both facts and personal observations.

Start with the big picture. Are your borders deep enough or are plants encroaching into the lawn or sidewalk? The answer may be bigger beds or it may be doing some judicious plant pruning or removal. If you decide bigger is better, fall is the perfect time to dig in.

Unless you love the idea of double digging, do what I do. Cover the lawn with several sheets of black and white newspaper, water it well, add an inch or so of mushroom compost, and then cover with a few inches of hardwood mulch fines. By the time spring rolls around, the sod will have died and the newspaper will have deteriorated. Rototill this top dressing of rich organic matter into the soil base and you'll be ready for planting.

Assess your hardscape. Are sidewalks, patios and retaining walls of adequate size and in good condition or is it time to consider replacement or repair? Landscape contractors usually have more time available in their schedules at this time of year. Get the work done now and you'll avoid the spring rush. Need another reason to do it now? Plants are just about ready for their winter nap and can simply be cut back if they are damaged by construction.

Perhaps you notice your lawn is thinning due to the increased shade caused by maturing trees. Fall's cooler temperatures and increased rainfall make it an ideal time to establish a new bed of groundcover. Or consider adding a new garden under a favorite tree filled with the lush textures of shade-loving plants.

Check out the photos you've taken throughout the season. Are you satisfied with the sequence of color or were there gaps in bloom time? If there were periods in which 'lackluster' would have been the best way to describe your garden, make notes of the most important characteristics of the plants needed to remedy the dullness.

Don't worry about listing a specific botanical specimen at this point. Instead, think in broad strokes. For example, list ideas like "purple flowers that bloom in July on short plants with fine textured foliage" or "bold-foliaged, tall plant that blooms with yellow flowers that bloom early in fall". Armed with this kind of wish list, you can spend snowy winter evenings searching garden references, catalogs, and on-line sources for the perfect plants.

In addition to assessing bloom, observe the textures in your garden too. Many perennials have relatively short bloom times, so the best gardens contain an abundance of plants whose foliage is nice all season long. They carry the landscape when flowers are few and far between.

Notice how plants are performing. Are there plants that would look better now if you had staked them in spring or cut them back in early summer? Now is the time to decide whether you will make the time to do this next year or if you will dig the plant out and replace it with something that requires less maintenance.

If the color in spring was less than satisfactory, plant bulbs now and be rewarded with a landscape bursting with color. If you've been discouraged from planting bulbs in the past by rascally rodents, try applying hot pepper wax. It will deter all but the most determined squirrels and chipmunks.

A few *Allium caeruleum* bulbs tossed into each hole for larger bulbs will also discourage critters. The alliums serve as bodyguards for other tastier bulbs because rodents find these members of the onion family unpalatable.

If your summer garden was lacking pizzazz, now is also the time to plant lilies. They all offer color and many add fragrance to the border without taking up much space. Ranging in color from white to yellow and pink to red, they are available in varieties from 2 to 6 feet tall.

Spend a little time now and you will be richly rewarded next spring.

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