

## Cooler Days Ideal for Garden Cleanup



*Photo by David W. Marshall, Leon County UF-IFAS Extension: It's time to clean up the garden and plant cool season annuals such as pansies or nemesia.*

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There is an ugliness in my flowerbeds this November morning. The once bright blossoms of zinnias have now gone to seed. Limp, yellowing leaves of lilies are hanging to the ground. A late crop of weeds is ready to drop their seeds to sprout a new generation next year.

With the first crisp air of fall last month, gardeners were rewarded with a spectacular show of chrysanthemums, wands of ornamental grass, large clumps of purple Mexican sage (*Salvia leucantha*) and six-foot tall swamp sunflowers (*Helianthus angustifolia*). Bright red pineapple sage and cardinal guard or firespike (*Odontonema strictum*) were blooming and attracting lingering hummingbirds and butterflies. They too have lost their luster.

It's time for gardeners to tidy up the landscape. It can be an easy and satisfying job if you clear away the dead flowers little by little, keep the falling leaves raked up, prune overgrown bushes, and put down compost and a new layer of mulch an hour or two a day. Then when spring comes and you are ready to add new plants, the beds will be ready.

Not only will the garden's appearance be improved, but clearing away old plant matter will help prevent insects and diseases from wintering over to spoil next year's garden. Many insect eggs and disease-causing organisms such as fungi, bacteria and viruses spend the winter on dead plants.

After the final harvest of vegetables, pull up the entire plants. Annual flowers, such as zinnias, marigolds, and impatiens may also be removed, roots and all. Weeds too should be pulled so as to not allow them to drop their seeds on the ground. Put them into trash bags, not the compost pile.

Perennials, you may notice, are already pushing up new green shoots and leaves, even though this year's faded blossoms are still there. Cut the old stalks to within six inches of ground unless you like to leave seeds such as those on purple cone flowers for birds to eat during the winter. Hosta leaves and iris are turning yellow as the nights get cooler. Remove the dead plant material, and if no green growth remains on the hostas, you may wish to place a marker by each plant so you will not accidentally dig up the roots next spring.

There may be a perennial or two that did not perform as desired or that multiplies so quickly that it is taking over the flowerbed. Now that they are looking their worst, you can dig undesirable plants out with little regret. The space you create with their removal can be used for new perennials or for others in your garden that need dividing, either now or in the spring when warmer weather will better favor root growth.

Where you have diseased or insect-damaged plants, remove old mulch or pine straw that may have become infested with disease spores or insect eggs. To give your garden soil additional nourishment, consider adding a layer of compost or composted cow manure. After adding organic matter to your cleaned beds, dress the top with a fresh layer of pine straw.

Leaves raked from your yard may be used in a compost pile or chopped up by the lawn mower to make bedding mulch. If you use whole leaves around plants as mulch, apply them lightly so they do not become matted together and keep water from penetrating to the roots of the plant.

Now is a good time to prune any dead or diseased branches from trees and shrubs. After their leaves have fallen, areas to be pruned are more easily seen. Do not prune azaleas or spring blooming shrubs and trees, because you will be cutting off their flower buds. Wait until after they have bloomed in the spring.

It is also a good time to plant new trees and shrubs, perhaps replacing some that have died or had to be moved to a better spot in the garden. Shrubs and small trees should continue to be watered deeply if it does not rain even after cold weather arrives.

Seeing the garden cleaned and readied for the coming spring is almost as rewarding as seeing it full of colorful summer flowers. Let it rest now, as you sit by the fire and check the garden catalogs for new plants to add next year. Or, you could get busy and add some cool-season annuals, such as petunias, pansies, nemesia, diascia, and snapdragons to sunny spots.

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