



## Putting the Garden to Bed

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



*Image by dmp2023*

As the trees and shrubs lose their colorful fall wardrobe, perennials brown and temperatures dip, the gardening season comes to a close. There still remains some fall chores to attend to so we'll be set to begin again once warm weather returns.

Probably the number one activity lately has been rounding up all those leaves. Some trees, like ashes, lose their leaves early and pretty much all at once. Rake them up and you're done. Maples usually provide a steady stream of lusciously colored droppings while oaks and beeches tenaciously hold on to their leaves.

Lately, there's been recommendations to leave the leaves. The premise being that they serve as habitat for many overwintering insects (some serving as food sources for birds) as well as providing a source of organic matter that embeds many benefits to soil as it breaks down and gets incorporated. This might be practical for some of us with light leaf cover.

However, those with several inches of leaves covering the lawn really need to rake or otherwise pick them up so they don't smother the turf. The leaves can still be put to good use elsewhere on the property. If partially shredded with the lawn mower, they can be used to cover cleaned up vegetable beds or used as a mulch around perennials and woody plants. Leaves can be added to the compost pile or can be corralled in an area and left to decay into leaf mold.

Go through your vegetable and flower beds and remove any diseased plants if you haven't already done so. Bag these up for the trash. Give the vegetable garden one last weeding and cover it with straw or leaves which can be left on top or worked in before planting next spring. Clean and put away those tomato cages, row markers and stakes. Make a note if more tomato cages are needed for next season.

In the perennial beds, cut back bearded irises to about 2 inches and remove any dead foliage to limit overwintering places for iris borer eggs. Hosta foliage can also be removed so that slugs won't have a place to spend the winter. Leave interesting seed heads for winter interest and food for birds but other plants can be cut back, especially those with powdery mildew like garden phlox.

It's not too late to send in a soil sample for testing. While one wouldn't be adding fertilizer to garden beds this time of year, limestone can be added any time the soil is not frozen. Keep in mind that it can take from 6 to 18 months after adding limestone for the pH to increase. Turnover times for soil tests are quicker in the fall and you'll know what you need to add come spring. Most gardeners just need the \$15 standard nutrient analysis. Directions can be found at [www.soiltesting.cahnr.uconn.edu](http://www.soiltesting.cahnr.uconn.edu).

Drain any hoses and watering cans and bring into a shed, garage or basement. Bring in garden ornaments, especially those made from cement or other materials that would weather poorly and possibly crack if left in wet, freezing conditions. Likewise, empty and clean birdbaths and relocate to a dry area. Clean garden tools before storing. Note if any need repairs or if a new tool or two would make gardening easier or more efficient.

Any newly planted fruit trees may benefit from a cage of hardware cloth around their trunks to prevent rodent injury. Chicken wire can be used to wrap around arborvitae and azaleas to protect them from deer.

There's still time to plant garlic and spring flowering bulbs. If done in the next week or so, the soil will still be warm enough for root growth to occur before the ground freezes. Dig up any tender ones like dahlias and gladioli to store inside over the winter.

There's also still time to take a slow walk around your property and look for gaps in the landscape as well as projects to attend to next year such as division of perennials or plants that really need to be pruned.

If you have questions on end of season gardening chores or any other gardening items, call the UConn Home and Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-4274 or visit us at [www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu](http://www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu) or your local Cooperative Extension Center.