

Gardening Newsletter

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Effects of a Warm Fall, October Tasks

With the very warm fall weather, thanks to an unusually strong El Niño, even vegetables that were planted late have been able to grow to a good size. I still have zucchini flowers setting fruit in my garden, which is a month later than usual, and with the ideal growth temperatures, some of my cabbages look like they will soon outweigh my little dog. Whereas new zucchini recipes are especially desirable in summer, for winter, any new ways to prepare cabbage are going to most welcome!

Another effect of the warm fall is that the leafminers that attack spinach, chard and beet leaves are still laying eggs on leaves. While those eggs may not have time to hatch into larvae that cause damage, it does suggest that carrot rust fly and cabbage root maggot adults may also still be laying eggs as their life cycles have a similar timing. SO, rather than removing insect netting over carrots and cabbage family plants at the end of October, I suggest you wait well into November to avoid the possibility of late eggs being laid that could result in larvae feeding in roots over the winter.

Another October activity that it might be a good idea to delay for a few weeks is planting garlic. October is usually the best month to plant, but a common soil-borne disease, Blue Mold Rot (*Penicillium* sp.), germinates best in warm, dry soil, therefore in a year like this, delaying planting until the soil is cold and wet might be a good precaution. If you have already planted your garlic, don't worry about it as the soil is cooling down quickly with the cool nights. But don't delay planting for too long—fall planted garlic has a larger root system and grows bigger bulbs than garlic planted after November.

Timing of the last harvest of winter squash and tomatoes continues to be a question for some gardeners. If the stem of a winter squash is so hard that you can't dent it with a fingernail, the squash is mature enough to pick. If the stem is still soft enough to dent right now, leave it on the vine. Squash is pretty much out of time, but because it doesn't ripen off the vine, you might as well leave immature squash on the plants until frost kills the leaves. If you haven't picked the rest of your outdoor tomatoes or peppers, consider doing so now while the fruit is still in good condition. Tomatoes and peppers in most greenhouses and tunnels are still doing fine and might carry on through November. Once tomatoes have started to turn from fully green to slightly yellowish green you can pick them and hold store them indoors to ripen off of the plants. The same goes for peppers: once they have begun to turn colour they can ripen fully indoors.

Stockpile dry leaves: Unusually for this time of year, falling leaves are still quite dry since we have had so little rain. The dry leaves are ideal to save for next summer's mulch. Store them in bags or in covered bins to keep them dry until you need them next June. A lot of leaves are still on trees so there is time to collect plenty of leaves for winter mulch to protect the soil and roots of overwintering vegetables in the garden. Don't shred leaves for winter mulch as they pack down and decompose too quickly. Work leaves in around the stems of plants, fluff them well up over the shoulders of beets, carrots, celeriac, kohlrabi, etc., and pile them several inches deep on empty beds. Set aside some leaves to layer over the tops of root crops (completely covering the leaves) later in the season to make a 'living root cellar'. I wait until the first sub-freezing weather is forecast (usually some time in December) before covering over root crops, but given the projected warm winter this

year, we might not see much freezing weather this year and this extra layer of mulch might be not be necessary.

Other quick tips:

Asparagus: Let the fronds turn completely yellow before cutting them down. Pile them on the bed for winter mulch or lay down a thick layer of other mulch material to protect the beds for the winter.

Stake tall vegetables: Avoid damage to stems and roots from winter winds by staking up plants of Brussels sprouts, kale, winter broccoli and cauliflower. Although cabbages are not tall, they are top heavy, so I drive in 3 or 4 stakes around each head to keep it in place and prevent stems from cracking.

Fill greenhouses/tunnels: If you have an unheated greenhouse, tunnels or large coldframes that aren't bursting with winter crops by now, you can remedy that by digging up plants from the garden and transplanting them into the protected space. Hardy lettuce, Swiss chard, spinach, Chinese cabbage and plants of any other leafy greens are especially good for this purpose. Harvest about half the leaves on the plants before digging them up and after transplanting keep plants well-watered. Shade them in midday until they stop wilting in direct sun, which shows their roots have recovered from transplanting.



Garden plants moved to the greenhouse in October.

For more detail on planting garlic, fall pests, staking plants and other fall tasks, see my October 17, 2025 and October 6, 2024 newsletters, archived on my website:

https://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html