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GARDEN ADVICE

Time to tackle the fall garden cleanup, but leave a few leaves behind

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



November is time for garden cleanup, but plan to leave a few leaves behind to nourish the soil. Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat

As you tackle fall garden cleanup that is crucial in November, consider leaving some fallen leaves in place. They create a natural mulch by returning nutrients to the soil and supporting beneficial insects and other invertebrates.

Decaying leaves provide winter habitat protection from the elements. Leaves don't need to be left exactly where they fall but can be raked into garden beds or around tree bases. Too many leaves can kill grass, but in soil they can suppress weeds, retain moisture, and boost nutrition. Keep in mind that during fire season you should not let leaf litter accumulate more than 2 to 4 inches deep within 5 to 30 feet of the home. It should be removed completely from 0 to 5 feet of the foundation. For more information on other types of winter habitat protection, visit xerces.org at <https://xerces.org/leave-the-leaves>.



It's the season for brilliantly colored fall fruits, such as pomegranates. SakSa / Shutterstock

Fall fruits

Autumn is the time to enjoy the brilliant colors of our local persimmon and pomegranate trees as their leaves turn color and festively colored fruits appear. Once hachiya and fuyu fruits appear on persimmon trees, it is wise to pick them when they achieve rich hue, but before they are fully ripe. The fruits will finish ripening indoors at room temperature away from pesky squirrels and curious birds. Use pruning shears to cut the persimmons off just above the green calyx that is attached to the top of the fruit. The persimmon is on the list of climate forward trees recommended by the City of Santa Rosa and Master Gardeners because they are predicted to thrive in our area through the projected climate change from 2050-2100. <https://ucanr.edu/sites/default/files/2025-03/Climate-Forward-Trees-for-Santa-Rosa.pdf>.



Ripe Persimmons fruit hanging on tree.

Also on the climate forward trees list is the pomegranate with its bright green, shiny foliage and attractive orange-red flowers. Watch now as the ripe pomegranates hanging on the trees turn a beautiful red. Most pomegranates are also ready to harvest in November. To get the most flavor, harvest pomegranates when fully ripe because they do not continue to ripen after picking. Cut the stem with pruning shears where it enters the fruit. Do not pull the fruit from the stem. You can store pomegranates in the refrigerator until ready to use, up to several months.

Planting trees and shrubs

November is ideal for planting trees and shrubs. Should you decide to add a *Diospyros kaki* (persimmon) or *Punica granatum* (pomegranate) tree to your garden landscape, skip the soil amendments in the planting hole. Instead, dig wide and backfill with native soil to encourage strong root growth. For other attractive ornamental additions that display dramatic leaf color in fall consider: Chinese pistache, 'Roger's Red' grape, *Viburnum*, *Cornus* (dogwood), *Liquidambar*, ash, crabapples, *Cotinus* (smoke bush), *Nyssa sylvatica* (tupelo) or *Lagerstroemia* (crape myrtle). In addition, there are many annuals that provide winter bloom and color such as Icelandic poppies, pansies or other *viola*, *calendula*, and *primula* (primroses). Most nurseries have a stock of six-packs of these and other cold weather bloomers.

November is the optimal time to plant California natives. Hardy species suited to our microclimates and ecosystems need little water once established but do require good irrigation to stimulate root growth. The best irrigation is our winter rainfall. Transplants often take one to two years to become established, so be patient. Good choices include California lilac (*Ceanothus*), manzanita, and California fuchsia.

In your vegetable garden, plant garlic now through late November. For optimal growth, choose the largest cloves and plant them pointy side up about 3-4 inches

apart in rows 12-18 inches apart. To ensure your garlic is disease-free with large, robust cloves, buy garlic bulbs from a reputable nursery that offers a choice of many noncommercial varieties. While there, consider picking up some shallot bulbs. Common shallot varieties include French Red, Gray Griselle and, for a shallot with a stronger onion-like flavor, Dutch Yellow. Planted now they will yield a harvest in late spring or early summer.

Consider planting a cover crop of clover or fava beans in your veggie beds. They improve soil structure and add nutrients, setting the stage for a productive spring garden. Cover crops prevent soil erosion, suppress weeds, and can be turned into “green manure” in spring to enrich the soil. To learn more, watch this quick video by Master Gardeners at Harvest for the Hungry Garden <https://tinyurl.com/55adwsjw>.

This is the time of year when your container plants benefit from a boost. Refresh their soil by mixing in some fresh potting soil and compost to replenish nutrients. If there have been any pest or disease issues in the pot, it's best to start with all new soil after washing out the pot. An alternative for larger containers is to refresh the top 1/3 of the soil instead of replacing it all.

Make water conservation a way of life and turn off all drip irrigation systems when rainy weather arrives. Keep an eye on weather forecasts and prepare for frost in higher elevations. Protect frost-tender plants such as citrus, hibiscus, and bougainvillea. Cover plants with frost cloth, sheets, lightweight blankets or burlap when temperatures dip to 32 degrees. A strand of holiday lights in a citrus tree is often enough to protect the plant from frost. Choose old-fashioned incandescent lights or use incandescent light bulbs rather than LED lights, which don't emit heat. Remember to remove the cover when the sun appears.

Contributors to this week's column were Diane Judd and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu. To receive free gardening tips and news about upcoming events, sign up for our monthly newsletter: <https://tinyurl.com/y3uynteb>