



Green Sense 10/06/13

## Fall Yard Plans

Foliage season, when New England's trees display a remarkable array of colors to feast the eyes, also brings falling leaves to remind us to prepare our yards for the winter. A little extra care for your lawn and garden will allow them a good start next spring.

*For your lawn*, when the first frost nears, mow your grass to a lower length (2-2 ½ inches), and mulch the clippings into the lawn. The mulched grass will put nutrients back in the soil as well as helping to retain soil during snowmelts.

Late fall, a month before a freeze, is the best time to fertilize your lawn. Use an organic fertilizer, which is healthier for your yard, your environment, your family and your pets.

*For your leaves*, rake them or use a mulching mower and mow them into your lawn.

Raking is great exercise – try to do some of your raking the “old-fashioned” way. Avoiding power tools will not only save energy and pollution, it will also be quieter. Don't forget to use kid power, it helps to build strong bones and muscles.

Compost your leaves, either in your back yard or at the town compost center (be sure you have a resident permit). Or, using your lawnmower to cut up the leaves, chop them and use them as mulch to over-winter perennials. The town also has street-side leaf pick-up dates (see [www.readingma.gov/sites/readingma/files/u172/fall\\_leaf\\_2013.pdf](http://www.readingma.gov/sites/readingma/files/u172/fall_leaf_2013.pdf)).

*For flower gardens*, water perennials deeply to help them through the winter. Mulch them with chopped leaves for extra protection from frost. If winter is mild, mulch can also help a few annuals survive to spring.

Plant fall bulbs and bare roots before the first frost, for a burst of early color in the spring. While preparing a flowerbed, add some finished compost for organic fertilizing.

Keep an eye out for seedheads of plants you would like to re-seed, and store them in marked containers for spring planting. When trimming back dead leaves and stems, keep a few inches above the ground to help protect the plant.

Compost the trimmings, removing any diseased vegetation or weed seeds.

*For vegetable gardens*, bring in any remaining produce. Green tomatoes can be coaxed to red by storing them in a paper bag in a cool place. Winter squash can last months if stored in a cool dry place between 55° and 60°F.

Many vegetables and herbs can be canned, frozen or dried for use well into fall and winter.

Consider planting a winter cover crop to help with soil retention. A cover crop will grow quickly in the fall, and can be tilled into the soil for natural fertilization in the spring. Another option is to add a layer of mulched leaves to protect against runoff. Leaves can also be tilled into the soil in the spring.

Some vegetable seeds produce best if they are planted in the fall, such as varieties of onion and garlic.

For fresh "local" produce in the winter, bring in some herbs for a windowsill garden. Or plant seeds indoors in cheerful decorative pots. The plants will brighten up your kitchen as well as being handy for cooking.

*Planning ahead*, over winter is a great time to envision reducing your lawn area. Replacing grass with native planted gardens can save on maintenance and water needs. The bareness of early winter gives you an opportunity to see your outdoor space more clearly and identify areas that could be converted.

Outline the areas you'd like to change, and spend the long indoor evenings planning your spring plantings. Or dig now and plant bulbs to sprout in the spring! Be ready to add perennials in the spring, as bulbs don't provide groundcover.

Fall is also a good time to plant additional trees or shrubs to your landscape. You can also plant a rain garden to capture water run-off.

*Finally*, remember to clear your sidewalks for easy passage for school children and walkers. Cut back low hanging trees and bushes. This will also ease the way for winter snow clearing and help your neighborhood.

A column by Reading Climate Committee members Michele Benson and Gina Snyder