

Fall Cleanup Cuts Down on Next Year's Pests

Most community gardens in the Boston area have regulations providing a date to gardeners to wrap-up the gardening season. There are many good reasons for this. With a little extra care in the autumn, gardening can be easier and more rewarding come spring. More importantly, maintaining a clean garden plot through the winter is important to prevent pest problems in the coming year.

Preparing the Community Garden for Winter: Remove all crop debris from the garden. Dead plants provide winter hiding places for insects and harbor pests that cause diseases. Either turn plant debris into the garden soil or compost it. Plant material that is diseased should be disposed of by taking to a larger compost site, where the temperature of the composting pile is high enough to kill the disease causing organisms.

Fall plowing or tilling can benefit the garden in several ways. Besides mixing in organic matter to improve soil structure and fertility, it can also disrupt the life cycle of many insect pests by exposing larvae and pupae to winter cold. If a soil test indicates the need to apply lime or sulfur to alter soil pH, apply them to the garden before fall tilling. By spring, the amendments will have corrected the pH problem. Planting a cover crop in the fall can reduce the growth of early spring weeds and control soil erosion.

Do not apply fertilizer to the garden in the fall. Winter rains will leach most fall-applied nutrients from the soil, wasting your time and money. Additionally, the nutrients which are washed away can cause environmental problems by polluting groundwater or causing algal blooms in ponds, streams, and river. Apply fertilizers to your garden only when plants are actively growing.

Sanitation in Fruit Crops: Community gardens with fruiting trees or shrubs need to adopt good orchard sanitation practices. The destruction of harboring places for insects and diseases plays a large part in any sanitation program. Common practices of an orchard sanitation program include removing all dropped fruit, raking and disposing of all dropped leaves, and pruning and destroying all diseased and damaged branches.

Old fruiting canes may be pruned from bramble fruits at any time after harvest. They should be cut close to the base of the plant, removed from the plot, and composted. Some growers, as a sanitation practice, do this immediately after harvest. Most however, wait until a dormant pruning in late winter.