



**Master Recycler Composter
Program of Thurston County**

Fall Composting Tasks

Fall is a perfect time to spend some time cleaning up from the summer and to start planning for the spring growing season. Here are some tips and resources to help you stay on top of the most important fall composting tasks.

General Garden Clean Up Tips

Clean up vegetable beds. Compost disease-free plant material. Add mulch, cardboard or plant a cover crop to help keep weeds from establishing in your planting beds. Cleaning up spent plant material from beds helps prevent disease from establishing in the beds. If you are growing cool season crops you can push bed clean up to later in the season.

Clean up select perennials from beds.

Some species of perennials are an ideal home for overwintering insects. Leave the plant intact and layer leaves or other mulches around the base of the plant while leaving the collar exposed. This will provide good habitat for birds and insects throughout the winter. While this is true for most perennials there are a few exceptions where it is best to cut them back i.e., hostas, peonies, daylilies, astilbes, and tall ornamental grasses. These species can be messy, and harbor pests and disease if not cut back for the winter. Powdery, mildew prone plants like bee balm, phlox, and peonies should also be cut back. Semi-herbaceous perennials, such as Shasta daisies and rudbeckias should be cut back 2-3 inches above the base of the plant.

Remove old fruiting canes from raspberries and blackberries.

Containers. Clean and sanitize any unused containers. Use a strong stream of water to dislodge any soil and debris. You can use a cleaning solution of 1-part bleach to 10 parts water to sanitize your containers. Let dry before storing empty pots in a place protected from the weather.

Weed and mulch. Weeding in the fall is critical for having a successful garden in the spring. Add mulch to bare spots after weeding. This will help deter new weeds from establishing themselves. Arborist wood chips is an excellent mulching material for fall application. If you are mulching around trees and shrubs leave the tree flare exposed. The tree flare is at the base of the tree where the widening of a trees trunk meets the soil line. Do not make mulch volcanos around the trunks of trees and stems of shrubs. A mulch volcano is when you pile mulch too deep around the trunk of a tree or shrub and you can't see the natural flare.

Do not prune summer blooming shrubs in the fall. This will stimulate new growth which is susceptible to damage during the winter. It is best to prune summer blooming shrubs in late winter/early spring.

Manage hazardous trees.

Fall is a good time to prune any hazardous trees or shrubs. We recommend that you use a certified arborist when work is needed on your home landscape. To find a local certified arborist visit: www.pnwisa.org or www.treesaregood.org

Remove and destroy diseased plants while they still have their leaves. It is easier to spot disease while the plant has its leaves. Do not compost diseased plant material.

Lawns. Remove weeds before they go to seed. New lawns can be seeded after Labor Day or in the spring. Thatch the lawn by raking it then overseed and top-dress thin areas in September-October. Fertilize as needed, using an organic fertilizer (September-October). A slow-release synthetic fertilizer can be used through mid-November. Review the *How to Use Compost* publication link listed in the below resource section.

General Fall Composting Tips

Make notes and take pictures of your composting area. What worked well? What needs improvement? Use this information to re-evaluate your composting process at least once a year.

Tools. Clean, sharpen, and oil tools after fall clean-up tasks. Make note of any tools that need replacing and watch for end of season sales.

Stockpile Nitrogen Rich Materials.

Falling leaves and other yard debris are an excellent source of nitrogen for compost piles. In the spring finding a source of nitrogen rich material can be a challenge. If you stockpile your leaves in the fall you can store them over the winter. Then you'll have a good source for when you need to build new compost piles in the spring. The easiest way to stockpile leaves is to take dry leaves, crush them and store them in a clean garbage can.

Yard Waste Bins

Check the Status of Your Current Bin

Fall is the perfect time to get existing bins ready for winter. Turn and water your pile. Turning your pile will add a much-needed oxygen boost. Water your pile until it feels like the consistency of a wrung-out sponge. Pick a date and add one more round of materials to your pile. After that date stop adding materials to that pile for the rest of the fall/winter. The correct ratio of nitrogen and carbon materials will help your pile so that it can "cook" all winter. This will result in being able to harvest nutrient rich compost next spring. If you keep adding materials to your pile all winter it won't fully compost in time to have finished compost to harvest next spring.

Don't have a compost pile started yet? Now is the perfect time to start one. Review the *Home Composting* publication link listed in the resources section of this handout. It has for all the details you need to successfully start a pile.

Watch for pests in your compost piles. Slugs and snails mate in the fall and lay eggs. Eggs will remain dormant throughout the winter and hatch next spring. Removing eggs in the fall will help control the population in the spring. Squash, cut, drown, or bait non-native slugs and snails and their eggs.

Worm Bins

Winterize your outside worm bins.

Fall is the time to winterize your outdoor worm bin. If your bin is portable, then move it to a secure area like in a garage or along the house under an eave. If you bin is too large to move then you will need to insulate it. Begin by emptying the bin and harvesting any current castings in the bin. Next line your bin with a layer of cardboard, magazines,

newspapers etc. This will help insulate your bin so that the worms won't freeze over the winter months. Next add new bedding to your bin. Make sure the bedding has enough moisture so that it is the consistency of a wrung-out sponge. Add your worms back to your bin and add some food scraps next to where you placed your worms. Note that over the winter, the rate of food decomposition will slow. Worms tend not to process as much as they do in the spring and summer. Worms in the winter tend to stay in one area of the bed. Feed next to them and watch to see how much they are consuming. You may have to adjust the frequency of feeding otherwise the food will rot and go rancid bringing on a host of other problems.

Sources & Resources

WSU Thurston County Extension Master Gardener and Master Recycler Composter Website

<https://extension.wsu.edu/thurston/>

WSU Master Gardener and Master Recycler Composter Programs of Thurston County website. This site has various local resources related to gardening, composting, and recycling.

Publications-

<https://extension.wsu.edu/thurston/gardening-info-fact-sheets/>

Download information publications from the WSU Extension publications website.



If you have a gardening, composting, or recycling question please email the WSU Thurston County Extension Master Gardener and Master Recycler Composter Question/Answer Clinic at master@co.thurston.wa.us

Thurston County & WSU Extension programs and policies are consistent with federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination policies. Evidence on noncompliance may be reported to your local office. Reasonable accommodations will be made for persons with disabilities and special needs who contact Cori Carlton, Program Manager at cori.carlton@co.thurston.wa.us or 360-867-2162 at least two weeks prior to the event.

Info sheet compiled by Cori Carlton 9/2024 - updated 9/2025