

Preparing the Garden for Winter

P-Patch TIPS are reference documents that address topics related to the development and ongoing management of P-Patch Community Gardens.

Tip

PP412

01/11/23

Overview

Not only is winterizing your garden plot by October 31st a requirement of gardening in a P-Patch, it is also a best practice for your garden. What you do with your soil over the winter will affect how your plants grow in the coming year. Here's some information to get you thinking about *how* to winterize your garden plot, and *why* we do it. We also recommend that you read our [P-Patch Tip Sheet on Soil Health](#) for more in-depth information about strategies highlighted here.

Cover Crops

August, September, and October are the best times to plant cover crop seeds. You don't have to plant cover crops in your entire plot – if you have one section that's clear, be sure to weed before you plant, and remember to cut down and till into the soil in the Spring before the crop goes to seed. Be aware that birds love to eat cover crop seeds!

Benefits of Cover Crops

- Provide nutrients, erosion control and competition to weed growth.
- Build soil's organic matter and humus content and improve soil-structure. Chop the cover crop down and turn it into the soil 4 weeks before you plant, or leave as mulch.
- Increase microbial activity and biomass in topsoil and provide food for soil microbes and earthworms which are vital to plant health.
- Increase water infiltration from rainfall and irrigation.
- Increase nutrient availability: cover crops extract nutrients from the subsoil and deposit them in the topsoil, thereby increasing their availability.
- Provide habitat, prey, nectar and pollen for beneficial insects.
- Break up the subsoil, clay layers and plow soles for increased water and air penetration.
- Fall cover crops include: fava beans, annual rye, annual crimson clover, vetch, field peas, or oats.



TIPS should not be used as a substitute for codes, regulations, or rule requirements. Individuals are responsible for compliance with all code, regulatory, and rule requirements, whether or not described in this TIP..

Mulch

Mulching your garden plot is easy, especially as the season turns from Summer to Fall.

When bringing in any organic materials to the garden, make sure you reference best practices to prevent the accidental contamination of the soil of the plot you are stewarding.

Mulching your garden plot helps:

- Conserve soil moisture
- Regulate soil temperature
- Decrease soil erosion and compaction from winter rains
- Decrease nutrient leaching from winter rains
- Suppress and prevent weed growth
- Encourage worms and other microorganisms to enrich the soil
- Recycle materials on site

Types of Mulch

- Leaves
- [Chop & Drop](#) the green waste from expiring plants directly into your garden plot
- Organic straw



Best Practice for Applying Mulch

- Apply a 2-3 inch layer of mulch around crops that you plan on over-wintering.
- Apply a layer of mulch 6-12 inches deep in spots with troublesome weeds, or areas that you don't have planted. **Always weed your garden plot prior to applying mulch.**
- Like cover crops, organic mulches can be turned directly into the soil 4 weeks before planting.
- As needed, add a cover to hold straw/leaves in place (coffee bags, or other permeable cover).

Over-Wintering Crops



Planting crops that can [over-winter](#), such as beets, kale, onions, parsley, collards, chard, and garlic, is a great way to ensure an active garden with an opportunity for harvest through the days when the sun sets before 5:00PM. Planting crops that over-winter should be combined with organic mulch, such as compost or leaves, to prevent bare soil from leaching nutrients and eroding.

Overwintered varieties should be planted between mid-summer and early-fall. Additionally, if considering planting crops that can over-winter, it is a good idea to protect them with a cold-frame or floating row cover. It is important to note that winter is a very active time for slugs and other pests. Keep an eye on crops for damage and harvest as necessary.

Online Resources (with Links)

- [Organic Gardening Information](#) from the P-Patch Community Gardening Program.
- Learn more about the [tasks you can do to prepare for fall](#).
- Read the [P-Patch Community Gardening Program Rules](#).
- Take a class with [Tilth Alliance](#).
- Learn more about [Growing Food in the City of Seattle](#). For a comprehensive overview of gardening in western Washington, view Tilth Alliance’s [“Maritime Northwest Garden Guide”](#).

Cover Crops

- [View winter cover crops for gardens west of the Cascades](#), including different varieties.
- King Conservation District provides cover crops seeds to community gardens across King County! To take part in this [giveaway](#), and learn more about it.

Mulching

- More information on [mulching in the winter](#). You can also learn more about the [benefit of using leaves as mulch](#).
- Learn how to [Chop & Drop](#) in the vegetable garden.

Over Wintering

For more information on the [types of crops that can be over-wintered](#) in Western Washington.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Heat Lovers				plant	Beans	plant	harvest		harvest			
						transplant	Tomatoes, Cucumbers		harvest			
						plant	Summer Squash		harvest			
				transplant	Onions			harvest		(plant fall varieties)		
Cool Hardy			plant	*Peas		harvest		plant		harvest		
			transplant	plant	*Lettuce		harvest	plant		harvest		
			plant	Potatoes				harvest				
			plant	*Asian Greens, Mustards, Spinach							harvest	
Over-Wintering	→	harvest		plant	Beets		harvest	plant (overwintering varieties)				→
	→	harvest		plant	Kale, Collards, & Chard		harvest	plant		harvest		→
	→			Garlic			harvest			plant (in October)		→

Resources (without Links)

- The P-Patch Community Gardening Program provides many tools and resources for community gardeners to be successful in their gardening plot such as Anti-Racism Resources, Tools for Gardening (*such as Protecting Bumblebee Habitat, Dealing with Wild Rabbits in the Garden, Growing Food in the City of Seattle, etc.*), Tips for Sharing the Harvest, Tools for Running a Garden, and more! Ask your Community Garden Coordinator for links or printed copies of these resources. They can also be found at: <https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/p-patch-community-gardening/toolkit-for-gardeners/tools-for-gardening>.
- Tilth Alliance offers a number of amazing classes to deepen the education of community gardeners and environmentalists. Tilth Alliance also partners with the P-Patch Community Gardening Program for free classes offered specifically to P-Patch community gardeners. These offerings are usually communicated via the main P-Patch ListServ. If interested in these classes, please contact your Community Garden Coordinator. You can view classes offered by Tilth Alliance here: <https://tilthalliance.org/get-involved/take-a-class/>.

Cover Crops

- King Conservation District provides cover crops seeds to community gardens across King County! To take part in this giveaway, and learn more about it, please contact King Conservation District's Community Agriculture Program Manager Miranda at: Miranda.Smith@kingcd.org.

Mulching

- Washington State University's Master Gardener Program offers a comprehensive *Guide to Mulches*, which details the benefits of mulching, what it does for your garden plot, as well as the many types of mulch that can be applied and the different steps required for each of them. You can access this guide here: <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2076/2017/07/C075-Guide-to-Mulches-15.pdf>.
- Chop & Drop Composting in your garden plot is a spectacular way to mulch and return the growth from your garden plot directly back to the soil. Chop & Drop is an attempt to mimic the regular decomposition found in nature, and also employs the power of our natural soil food web. A bio-diverse recycling system already exists right in the garden, and Chop & Drop nourishes and enriches the beneficial organisms we already have.
 - ◇ To Chop & Drop, you will Chop the plant at the soil line, leaving the roots in place. You will Chop this plant into tiny fragments and Drop them directly on the soil surface. Chopping the plant into tiny pieces speeds up the time to decompose and provides a more aesthetically pleasing look in your garden plot.
 - ◇ You do NOT want to Chop & Drop: a) weeds that have gone to seed, b) infested plants (aphids, whitefly, etc.), c) noxious or invasive plants (those that spread via rhizomes or vast root systems), or d) diseased plants (powdery mildew or tomato blight).
 - ◇ With Chop & Drop, other things you will want to consider include: How does the plant propagate or reproduce? If it is by seed, do you mind if it self-seeds? Many fruits and vegetables attract pests if left uncovered and on the ground—it is best to remove these from your garden plot and put in the City compost bin. You also want to consider the time to decay—plants with woody stems will take longer to decay than “green” stems.