

October Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

We begin to notice that the garden is growing slower this month. After hot and frantic summer harvests and preserving, we, too, can be calmer in our garden activities: keeping summer stragglers producing through frost, starting plants from seed, nurturing seedlings just transplanted, and beginning to harvest cool-season crops. Clean up includes adding plant debris to the compost pile and storing pots and lumber and other leftovers away from the garden. The pleasantly cool weather is refreshing to work in after summer's heat.

Vegetables and Fruits

Sow fava beans, celery, chard, chives, garlic, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce (especially romaine types and small-heading bibb and buttercrunch types, which overwinter well with minimal damage from light frosts), green and long-day bulb onions (which will mature during the lengthening days of next spring and early summer), parsley, peas, radishes, spinaches (especially savoy types for more frost resistance), and shallots. Sowing bulb onion seed now will result in larger bulbs that will bolt less in early spring than store-bought sets, which are often stored improperly (mostly too warm for too long) while on display. Also transplant artichokes, asparagus, beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, established herbs (especially comfrey, sage, thyme), and rhubarb. All these will mature before the first hard frost and can be overwintered with only minor damage to varieties with more delicate foliage.



Apples, summer's last gift to last through the winter.
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Just about any broccoli variety will do well in our area. Try "sprouting" kinds for lots of small heads. For brilliant chartreuse, pointed heads that taste milder than regular broccoli, try "Romanesco," a cross between broccoli and cauliflower.

Plant asparagus crowns at least six inches deep, and mulch them heavily with manure--winter rains will slowly wash the nutrients down to the root zone. Plant cole crops up to the first set of leaves to prevent their developing into weak, leggy plants.

After dividing and repotting established herbs for overwintering indoors, leave the newly-potted sections in a lightly shaded place for three weeks, and then move them indoors to a cool spot with bright light. This will allow them time to acclimate to higher indoor temperatures and drier humidity before it's too cold outdoors to make the change without shock.

Garlic planted now will develop a strong root system over the winter, and leaf production can begin early in the spring, resulting in a large head next summer. So the sooner you plant them now in rich, well-drained soil, the larger they'll be at harvest. Planting in the spring, even with rich soil, will produce only medium- or small-sized cloves, or a single bulb without cloves. (These small bulbs can be used in place of a single large clove in recipes. They can also be left in the soil or stored and replanted the following fall, when they'll develop further and then mature into separate cloves.)

For the largest-sized garlic, plant cloves four to six inches apart now in a raised planting bed that is well-drained and compost-enriched, and keep the soil moist through next June.

Renovate strawberry beds away from where potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers have grown within the last three years. Incorporate rock fertilizers, compost, and cottonseed meal. Water well. After two to four weeks, transplant strawberries one foot apart so the crown is just above the soil level. Strong roots will develop over the winter, and spring warmth will encourage fast growth and large berries.

Cover tender plants still being harvested--beans, cucumbers, eggplants, okra, peppers, and tomatoes--and keep them well-watered to protect them against early frosts. Don't allow plastic or glass covers to touch the foliage, however, or the frost may damage the foliage. Harvest all the fruits before the first hard freeze. If they are exposed to this frost, eat them immediately, or they'll spoil quickly.



Monster pumpkins just in time for Halloween! See the dragonfly?
Photo by Yvonne Savio
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Harvest herbs for making wreaths or vinegars as holiday presents. Herb wreaths are easy to make and can include whatever herbs are most used by your recipient. Good choices include basil, oregano, marjoram, anise, parsley, thyme, sage, dill, and tarragon.

Harvest winter squash, pumpkins, and decorative gourds when the vines are dry and the rinds are hard and resist easy puncture by a fingernail. Cut the stems rather than breaking or tearing them, and leave two inches of stem attached to the squash to lessen the chance of spoilage. Gourds will dry quicker if you drill a small hole at each end. Let them cure in a dry, well-ventilated area at room temperature for two weeks. Store cured squash at 50 to 60 degrees in a dry area. Check them weekly for mold. If any appears, wipe it off with a paper towel moistened with vinegar. Squash should keep up to six months.

Toast--don't toss--your pumpkin seeds when you carve your Jack O'Lantern. Separate the seeds from the stringy pulp by washing the seeds well. Spread them on a cookie sheet and sprinkle lightly with salt if desired. Toast them for three or four minutes at 375 degrees, stir, and toast another two or three minutes until they're evenly golden. Cool them to room temperature, and enjoy!

Harvest potatoes now, being careful not to cut or bruise them, or leave them in the soil for harvest through the winter. Take care to not expose them to sunlight or soil cracks, however, or they'll develop inedible, bitter green areas. (After off cutting these areas and discarding them, the remaining potato can be eaten.) After harvest, hold the potatoes at 75 to 85 degrees for a week, and then store them at 50 to 60 degrees with high humidity. They should keep for six to fifteen weeks. Refrigerating them at 36 to 40 degrees will turn some of the starch into sugar, making them taste oddly sweet and fry dark.

Harvest sweet potatoes when the vines yellow. Try to get them before the leaves are killed by frost. Air dry them for a day, keep them at 85 to 90 degrees with 90 to 95 percent humidity for one to two weeks, and then store them at 55 to 60 degrees and 90 to 95 percent humidity. The flavor improves during storage, as part of the starch content turns into sugar (what you didn't want to happen with the white potatoes).

Feed subtropicals like citrus and avocados with a fertilizer containing high levels of phosphorus and potassium but no nitrogen to help them become cold-hardy. Keep them watered, though, until the rains take over.

Remove bramble berry canes that fruited this year, or wait until January, when the thorny leaves have dropped, the canes are bare, and new and old growth are easy to tell apart.

Give one last deep watering to grapevines and deciduous trees to make them more cold-hardy. Discontinue feeding, or new growth will be tender and susceptible to frost damage. Clear the soil under trees by pulling back the mulch, discarding fruit mummies, and moving leaves to the compost pile as soon as they fall. Remove stakes and branch spreaders from trees. Check fruit tree trunk bases for rodent damage, and provide trunk protectors if necessary.

Dig new tree planting sites to be planted later in the winter. Cover the holes and the backfill soil with tarps to keep them dry and workable when you're ready to plant. Lay boards over the hole, too, to keep people and pets from falling in. Check with neighbors, nurseries, and Cooperative Extension personnel for varieties that grow best locally and are resistant to diseases and pests.

Plan your dormant fruit tree spraying schedule to coincide approximately with cool-weather holidays--Thanksgiving, New Year's Day, and Valentine's Day. Specific cues are even more important to follow--the fall of the last leaf (Thanksgiving), the height of dormancy (New Year's Day), and bud swell (Valentine's

Day). Spray-ing at the precise period of bud swell is especially important--before the buds swell is too early, and after the blossoms open is too late.

Ornamentals

Sow or transplant ageratum, alyssum, bachelor's buttons (cornflower), calendulas, campanulas (canterbury bells), candytufts (iberis), chrysanthemums, clarkias (godetia), columbines (aquilegia), coralbells (heuchera), coreopsis (pot of gold), African daisies (arctotis, gazania), delphiniums, dianthus (carnation, pinks, sweet William), forget-me-nots (myosotis), four-o'clocks, foxgloves, gaillardias, hollyhocks, larkspur, linarias, love-in-a-mist (nigella, Persian jewel), lunaria (honesty, money plant, silver dollar plant), blue marguerites (felicia), nierembergias (cup flower), ornamental cabbage and kale, phloxes, California and Iceland and Oriental and Shirley poppies, primroses, rudbeckias (coneflower, gloriosa daisy, echinacea, monarch daisy, black-eyed-Susan), snapdragons, stocks, stokesia, sweet peas, verbenas, violas (Johnny-jump-ups, pansies, violets), and wildflowers.



Choose your Fall-color tree carefully -- chances are it'll outlive you.
Photo by Yvonne Savio
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All these will develop stronger plants and bloom earlier and more profusely in the spring when they've been sown now since they'll grow extensive root systems over the winter.

This month's weather makes heavy work almost enjoyable. Most perennials and some annuals can be transplanted or divided and replanted. These include acanthus, agapanthus, Japanese anemone, astilbe, bergenia, bleeding hearts (dicentra), calendulas, evergreen candytuft, columbine, coralbells (heuchera), coreopsis, michaelmas and Shasta daisies, daylilies, delphiniums, dianthus (carnation, pinks, sweet William), dusty miller, foxgloves, heliopsis, helleborus (Christmas rose, Lenten rose), hollyhocks, bearded irises, peonies, phlox, Oriental poppies, primroses, rudbeckias (gloriosa daisy, coneflower, echinacea, monarch daisy, black-eyed-Susan), statice, stock, stokesia, veronica, and yarrow. Use a spade or sharp knife to separate the large clumps, or gently pull apart individual plants after loosening the clump from its surrounding soil. Discard the old, unproductive sections. Trim the foliage of young growth to four or six inches. Dig in compost, replant, and water in well.

For fall color, some plants to include are barberry (berberis), cotoneaster, nandina, Oregon grape (mahonia), pyracantha, raphiolepis, and viburnum. Trees include Chinese pistache, sapium, persimmon, Bradford and Aristocrat pear, ginkgo, and Raywood ash.

Trim roses after their last flush of blooms, but hold off on severe pruning until they're fully dormant, in January. Feed them with a no-nitrogen, high-phosphorus, high-potassium fertilizer to help them harden off.

Now that you've seen the roses perform over the summer, consider which you should replace or add. You can prepare the new planting holes, adding some organic matter and manure or long-release plant food. This will give plants a good start either this fall for transplants or next January for bare-root plants.

After you've pruned your oleanders, remember not to burn the trimmings. The entire plant is toxic, including the smoke from burning and the water in which flowers have been placed. According to the *AMA Handbook on Poisonous and Injurious Plants*, the toxins in the plant are cardioactive glycosides similar to those in digitalis. However, you can compost oleander leaves, flowers, and stems--but only if the pile gets hot enough--since bacteria and fungi will break down the organic compounds. Large stems and branches that won't compost quickly should be discarded.

Transplant azaleas and camellias. Thin bloom buds to three or four inches apart for fewer but more spectacular blooms in the spring. Feed camellias and azaleas lightly all winter long to help develop their spring blooms.

Transplant hardy evergreens and water them deeply. Expect some needles on established pines, hemlocks, and spruces to dry and fall. Compost pine needles and oak leaves for use as mulch on acid-loving azaleas, camellias, gardenias, rhododendrons, and strawberries.

Move container plants next to--but not touching--a fence or wall so plants absorb reflected daytime heat and are shielded from winds.

Don't wait much longer to purchase spring-blooming bulbs. This is one time when cheap prices and bottom-of-the-barrel leftovers are a waste of money rather than a bargain. If you can't buy the best, large-size bulbs shortly after they become available, wait until next year.

Separate and replant crowded clumps of bulbs. Many will grow well beneath deciduous trees, as most of the bulb growth is in the early spring before the trees leaf out.

For a cover crop of flowers before, during, and after spring bulb bloom, sow seeds or plant seedlings of low-growing annual bloomers after you've planted the bulbs. Think of color contrasts such as purple pansies with yellow daffodils or white alyssum with red tulips. Good choices include calendulas, pansies, Iceland poppies, primroses, dwarf snapdragons, dwarf stock, and violas. Sow seed thickly, water the area, mulch it lightly, and keep it moist until seedlings have two sets of true leaves.

Dig summer-flowering bulbs such as tuberous begonias, caladiums, cannas, dahlias, gladioli, and tuberose after their foliage has died back or as soon as it is killed by frost. Gently clean the soil from the corms and tubers. Don't wash them or force the tops off--they'll shrivel and separate when they're ready. Store them in fine dry peat, sawdust, sand, or vermiculite at temperatures not lower than 60 degrees with low humidity.

Fertilize cool-season grass lawns. Lower the blade height on your lawn mower to encourage short, bushy growth.

You can still seed new lawns or reseed thin spots in established ones. For good germination, water newly-seeded lawns two or three times a day for the first two weeks. For another two weeks, water once a day. Then, change to watering only three times a week but for longer periods. You want the moisture to reach two to three inches down so the roots grow deeply into the well-prepared seedbed. When the grass gets bushy and about three inches tall--about a month after sowing--the lawn is ready for its first mowing. Allow the soil to become firm and fairly dry before mowing, however, to avoid compressing the new lawn with mower wheels and your footsteps.

Knock down water basins around trees and shrubs, and turn the soil to loosen it so water can penetrate more easily, and not puddle.

General

Plant ground covers--including fava (broad) beans, clover, mustard, oats, annual rye, wheat, and vetch--to be turned into the soil early in the spring as "green manure." Remove plant debris from soil surfaces, and cultivate the soil to bring underground overwintering pests and weed seeds to the surface.

Help overwintering plants harden off by changing your irrigation schedule. Cooler weather slows evaporation from the soil and transpiration from plant foliage, so irrigation is needed less often. So, decrease the number of times--but not the length of time--you water. For example, water once every two weeks instead of once a week, but still water for half an hour each time. This change will still provide water to deep roots while allowing for longer periods for the soil to dry in between waterings, and it doesn't encourage new, frost-tender growth.

Continue replenishing your compost pile by adding non-greasy kitchen and grass clippings, plant foliage, and dry matter in layers with soil. Chop up bulky items to help them break down faster. Keep the pile moist but not waterlogged, and loosen or turn it every other week or so to let in air. When rains begin, cover the pile loosely to prevent its getting too waterlogged and leaching out its rich nitrogen. To keep a compost pile "working hot," build it between three and five feet high and wide for the most favorable surface-to-volume ratio. Keep in balance all the necessary ingredients--fresh, moist greenery, dried leaves and small twigs or wood chips, and some soil or compost or manure.

Regretably, cool, moist weather brings back snails and slugs, just in time to attack succulent seedlings. Hand pick and stomp them after dark and after overhead watering.

Before you buy or make a birdhouse, make sure it'll attract the birds you want. The size of the box and the diameter of the opening will dictate what kinds of birds may move in. But even then, occupancy isn't guaranteed.

To keep bird seed from sprouting once it's spilled out of its container, bake it on a cookie sheet in a 300-degree oven for five minutes. The heat will sterilize the seed without lessening its nutritive value.

There is a difference between glass and plastic for greenhouses or cloches. Plastic transmits the full spectrum of light, whereas glass filters out the long ultra-violet rays that are a beneficial portion of sunlight.

Feed all overwintering plants with a low-nitrogen, high-phosphorus, high-potassium fertilizer to help them become cold-hardy.