Autumn Garden Checklist

Autumn rituals ready the garden for winter's cold. Plants still need some moisture and the soil needs protecting, so watch the forecast, look for dew, monitor plants, and give them a nurturing hand. These 5 rituals are a place to begin.

1. Conduct a plant health evaluation.
Are plants looking healthy and robust? Did they all survive the summer's heat and dry spells? Are stems and branches intact? Is the ground surface slightly moist? A 'yes' to all of these is a good indicator your garden will delight again in the spring.

- Replace plants that have seen better days and fill in any gaps. Autumn's cool, rainy days help roots settle in by spring. Mulch new plantings to protect the roots and the soil.
- Gently prune small broken stems so the plant can self-seal the cut before the cold. Save major tree pruning for full dormancy (February to March).
- Water about 1/8 inch a week for most perennial beds until the rains set in; a few days of morning dew is often enough. Tip: if your shoe toes get wet walking through grass, your planting beds are getting enough moisture too.
- Give the lawn a last haircut to 4 inches. The longer blades help protect the soil and the roots.

2. Ready planting beds for winter.

- Add 2 to 3 inches of mulch, including fallen leaves gathered from the driveway, patio, path, roof, and gutters. Mulch protects the soil from compaction, lets rain soak in slowly, prevents erosion, and adds nutrients as it breaks down.
- Let the woodies (woody-stemmed plants) be until spring.
- Give herbaceous plants a 'leaf cut' that keeps 2 to 3 inches of stem, and use the cut leaves to protect the root crown. If slugs are feasting on the spent leaves, move the invaders to another home and use shredded bark mulch instead.
- Manage the weeds. Pull them by their roots, or at least remove the seed heads. Lots of them? Divide and conquer: 15 minutes a day on one small area. Better yet, walk-by weeding: see a weed, pull a weed.

3. Ready trees for winter.

- Until the rainstorm pattern sets in, give young trees a drink every 10 to 14 days. Mature, established trees have already learned to adapt to the seasonal weather.
- If leaves fall on grass, rake some into a 3-inch-high ring around the trunk, without piling them against it. Use the rest in the garden or the compost bin.

4. Ready irrigation systems for winter.

- Drain automated systems (underground or surface) to prevent pipes from bursting in freezing weather.
- Reset the controller to stop water cycles once the rainstorm pattern sets in.
- Drain hoses and coil them on a reel or on the ground so no one trips on the darker, shorter days.
- Keep a watering can or bucket handy for extended dry, cold spells in winter.

5. Two don'ts.

- Don't fertilize until spring, when the soil is 50°F or warmer. Winter rain carries unused fertilizer into the water table and nearby streams.
- Don't dig or work the soil when it's wet. Wet soil compacts easily. Wait 2 to 3 days after a rain to plant or move soil.

Spot something that doesn't look right? If you're not sure whether it's a normal autumn change or a symptom that needs a fix-it plan, call or email me for expert horticultural advice and some peace of mind.

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