

# Secrets of a Four Season Garden



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# Secrets of a 4 Season Garden

Gardeners have a keener sense of the seasons than folks who don't have a vested interest in frost dates and the blight of the bumble bee. We know the sight of the first dandelion in bloom means it's time to plant the potatoes and that a rose is not just a rose, it's a signal that it's time to mulch.

We start the spring season in a frenzy, deceiving ourselves that we will actually get everything done. From there it's a race to stay on top of the chores – if you can call them that, since these chores are the very soul of gardening. If we didn't enjoy them so much, we might actually use that garden bench we perfectly positioned for the best view of our Eden, instead of nose to soil in the endless combat with weeds.

Living in an area with frigid winters means that every second of gardening season counts. We want color and abundance throughout, from the first bulbs of spring through the jeweled leaves of fall.

Most cold climate gardeners view the close of autumn with a touch of ambivalence. We may relish the cozy snugness of sitting by the fire, but once the holidays have passed, we are itchy to get back in the garden. While it's lovely to have 4 distinct seasons, why does winter have to be so long?

On the other hand, we may have the best of all worlds by being given an entire season to simply sit back and bask in the beauty of our gardens, as we make plans for next season. What beauty, you ask? Your garden should hold as many surprises in winter as it does during the growing season. If not, you need to start planning right now. A four season garden truly does take four seasons to create. Let's get going now.

*"Winter is an etching, spring a watercolor, summer an oil painting  
and autumn a mosaic of them all." --Stanley Horowitz*

# Winter

*"If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant." --Anne Bradstreet*

What do you think of when you hear “winter interest”? Myth or magic? While we won’t have much in bloom during the winter months, there are still plenty of diversions from berries, bark, seed pods, evergreens (and yellows and blues), garden structures, containers, and wildlife. However a garden in winter has nowhere to hide. No leaves, no plants spilling over one another, no camouflage. All its flaws will be front and center. Take heart, if you can get your winter garden in shape, the rest of the year will fall into place.

Often it seems like the real gardening of winter is done in your armchair. Winter is when we make our future plans and scour seed and plant catalogs for new obsessions. If you can get outdoors during winter, there are always gardening chores to do, like pruning, scouting for over-wintering pests, and harvesting hearty greens. But even if the weather deprives you of the scent of damp soil, you should still be able to enjoy the sight of your garden. Set yourself these tasks.

**Blur the Transition:** You can ease changeover to winter by having late season plants, like hydrangeas and beautyberry, that hang onto their leaves or flowers well past snow, as well as those, like witch hazel, that can’t wait for winter to end before they start blooming. This will make the transition less stark, but it will come nonetheless.

**Survey the Situation:** Winter gardening is about observation. Try to resist the temptation to cut everything down to the ground in the fall. Give yourself a chance to see how the garden behaves in winter; what continues to look good, despite the dreary rains or a thumping of snow. Color, shape, and texture, the triumvirate of garden design, do not disappear in winter. They simply take on different forms.

**Look for Structure:** It’s often easier to see the architecture and patterns or “bones” of your garden without the distraction of leaves and flowers. When the snow melts on your pathways, do they lead your eye where you intend it to go? Are there clusters of trees and shrubs that get lost in the crowd and wide expanses with no level changes at all? Is there an interesting plant that needs more impact. For instance, would 3 red twig dogwoods make a bold statement where 1 only whispers?

**Take it One Plant at a Time:** If your garden scene fades to gray in winter, start paying attention to plants that catch your eye elsewhere. Take photos. Ask what it is. Learning to appreciate the winter appeal of plants is no different than the way we learn to love them in flower. We notice them one at a time and eventually we populate our gardens with our favorites.

## Four Season Gardening Checklist - Winter

### Prep

- Order seeds and plants early, for the best selection

### Plant

- Start seeds indoors, especially slow growers, in late winter

### Persevere

- Cut branches of spring blooming shrubs to force into bloom
- Keep snow off evergreens
- Photograph your garden from different angles, on different days
- Keep the bird feeders full
- Take a class or two

### Ponder

- Leave plants standing to evaluate
- Observe and take notes
  - Which plants can be cut down
  - Which plants do the birds congregate around
  - Where does the light hit
  - Are there enough structures? Too many.
  - Are there exposed views you want to screen

*"Anyone who thinks that gardening begins in the spring and ends in the fall is missing the best part of the whole year. For gardening begins in January with the dream." --Josephine Nuese*

## Forcing Branches

### Good Candidates:

azalea, beautybush, crab apple, flowering quince, forsythia, magnolia, pussy willow, redbud, rhododendron, serviceberry, spirea, witch hazel, and fruit trees like cherries and apples.

### When to Cut Branches

Most spring flowering trees and shrubs need a period of cold dormancy before they will bloom. For most, wait until mid-January before cutting. Exceptions that need a longer dormancy include: crab apples, beautybush, redbud and spirea. For these, wait until late-February / early-March.

### What to Cut

Look for swollen buds. There are flower and leaf buds on the stems. Flower buds tend to be the larger, rounder buds.

### Forcing into Bloom

Smash the bottoms of the stems with a hammer and submerge in water. Loosely cover the branches with a plastic bag and place in a cool spot, away from direct sunlight.

Buds will open within 1 – 6 weeks. Move the branches into sunlight and enjoy.



# Spring

*"Spring makes its own statement, so loud and clear that the gardener seems to be only one of the instruments, not the composer." - Geoffrey B. Charlesworth*

We've got our notes from winter observation. We've got our photos. We're ready to get started on our four season garden, right? That's the plan. But spring is tough to navigate. We're so anxious to get going and there are so many shiny baubles that pull us down divergent paths. Don't beat yourself up if you don't finish every task at hand

It does help to prioritize. Planting can wait, pruning can't – weeds won't.

**Clean Up:** Begin by clearing the debris. Cut back any remaining perennials and remove dead annuals and weeds. Treat your soil to a top dressing of compost and let it settle in as you move on to pruning. Don't trim any spring bloomers yet, but the remaining trees and shrubs should be pruned before or just as they are leafing out.

**Shop:** Now you can move on to the really fun stuff. Pull out that list of plants you want to add for multi-season interest and head to your favorite nursery. Remind yourself that the plants upfront that are already in flower are decoys. They want you to buy these because they know the flowers will soon fade and you'll be back for more. You're gardening for the long haul and you have a plan for a much longer season of bloom. (Okay, a couple of instant gratification plants will do your soul good.)

**Rearrange:** More than likely, you will need to move plants around to make room for new ones. Now is the perfect time to lift and divide any crowded plants. Replant them for a bigger swathe and impact or pot them up for a plant swap.

**Reassess:** If you find your dreams were bigger than your garden, it's easy enough to downsize. Grasses, like Miscanthus, switch grass (Panicum) and Northern sea oats (Chasmanthium), make good substitutes for shrubs. Evergreen perennials and perennials with drying flowers and seedpods that remain attractive into winter, like Astilbe, coneflower and sedum, can be planted in commanding clumps.

**Branching Out:** Don't neglect your vegetable garden. That's a topic we'll handle at another time, but I'll include this reminder. Although it's not much to look at in winter, but those first green shoots hold the most promise of anything in the garden. Get your soil amended, the beds prepared, have your stakes ready to go, and grab your seeds and cool season seedlings. It's time to plant broccoli, kale and all the cole crops, lots of salad fixings and the first of several succession plantings of radish, carrots, beets, and more. The garden is in anticipatory mode. Stand back.

## Four Season Gardening Checklist - Spring

### Prep

- Have soil tested
- Remove winter mulch and add a 3-4 inch layer of compost (hold off if you want self-sowers)

### Plant

- Begin direct sowing cold hardy plants like nigella and poppies
- Add evergreen perennials to the beds

### Persevere

- Cut back any perennials and ornamental grasses still standing
- Divide and plant perennials
- Prune roses and summer flowering shrubs before they leaf out
- Fertilize when plants reach about 3 - 4 inches in new growth
- Stay on top of emerging weeds, especially perennials weeds
- Mulch everything
- Start applying deer and rabbit repellents
- Limb up trees to expose bark or create a more interesting profile
- Clean up edges and paths.

### Ponder

- Take stock of early bulbs and note what to plant in the fall
- Keep checking the view of your garden from your window
- Reposition any structure or ornaments that looked out of place
- Consider adding lighting to your garden. Ideas: A single light shining up through the branches of a tree. Small led lights strung round a gazebo or fence.

### Evergreen Perennials

Although some may become hidden by snow, their leaves will still peek out on occasion.

**Armeria** (Thrift, Sea Pink)  
**Bergenia** (Heartleaf)  
**Bergenia** (Pig Squeak)  
**Dianthus** (Pinks)  
**Epimedium** (Barrenwort)  
**Carex** (Sedge)  
**Festuca** (Blue Fescue)  
**Helleborus** (Lenten Rose)  
**Heuchera** (Coral Bells)  
**Heucherella** (Foamy Bells)  
**Iberis** (Candytuft)  
**Lavandula** (Lavender)  
**Sedum** (Stonecrop) )  
**Thymus** (Creeping Thyme)  
**Tiarella** (Foamflower)  
**Vinca** (Myrtle, Periwinkle)  
**Yucca** (Adam's Needle)



*"Spring is nature's way of saying, "Let's party!"-- Robin Williams.*

# Summer

*"Ah, summer, what power you have to make us suffer and like it." - Russel Baker*

We can stop holding our breath now, summer is here. Open your eyes and ears and take it all in. The garden is never so perfect as that first flush when the weather warms and the plants sit up and take notice. But gardens are not still lifes and the real gardening is just beginning. Anyone can plant a geranium. Keeping it happy takes a gardener.

Winter is a long forgotten memory now. If you planned well and spent the spring implementing, summer should be a breeze. Your job now is to keep the garden healthy. Perhaps the least enjoyable gardening task is watering. If you find yourself dragging the hose out daily, or at least thinking you should be, a bit of tweaking is in order. There are plenty of plants that do well without a lot of supplemental watering. These should make up the bulk of your garden. There are always prima donas that we must have, but plant them near the faucet.

**Know Your Plants:** Now that we can cross watering off our list, let's get back to planning our four season garden. Few plants bloom continually and some do not repeat bloom at all. So when laying out your garden, it's crucial to know when a plant flowers and for how long. There's no point in pairing the perfect better yellow with your purple larkspur if the flowers are going to pass in the night.

More importantly, you will want to get as much bang from your plants as possible. Flowers that bloom for weeks or look good long after bloom, like sedum and astilbe, are good choices. So are plants that rely less on flowers than on foliage, like heuchera and hosta. Keep up on deadheading, and maybe even shear plants back entirely, to get fresh new growth in mid-season.

**Prune with a Plan:** But go beyond that and consider some creative pruning. Pinch or cut back fall flowers every 3 – 4 weeks, until July 4<sup>th</sup>, so that they branch out, set more buds and hold off blooming for an end of season show.

You can get another month of blooms from most summer perennials by pruning the clump in stages. Cut back just the front half or third, when they reach about 6 inches tall. Allow the remainder to grow unpruned or prune an additional third in another 3 – 4 weeks. Now you've staggered their bloom time so that the front flowers will bloom and fade as those behind them are just coming into flower.

**Go Wild:** Birds provide a hefty dose of year round interest to you garden. Add some plants with seeds to feed them in winter or to provide shelter and they'll work hard for you, controlling insects and serenading you with song.

Whew. That's a lot. Time for a break.

## Four Season Gardening Checklist - Summer

### Prep

- Be prepared for June fruit drop, as fruit trees self-thin their crops
- Protect ripening berries with nets or row covers

### Plant

- Plant early and keep them well watered.
- Get your fall-blooming crocus and colchicum planted so they'll bloom on time.

### Persevere

- Side dress with compost for mid-season pick-up and add more mulch, if necessary
- Keep up on deadheading, for long season bloom
- Pinch back tall growing fall bloomers like asters, monarda and helianthus
- Begin dividing perennials. Start with the bearded iris.
- Keep watch for:
  - 4-lined plant bug damage, especially on the mint family
  - Japanese Beetles
  - Slugs
  - Thrips (distorted flowers)

### Ponder

- Check garden centers for mark downs on remaining plants
- Take pictures of your garden at peak and combinations you'd like to repeat.

### Plants with Seeds for Birds

Asters  
Brown-eyed Susan  
Coneflowers  
Coreopsis  
Cornflowers  
Cosmos  
Cup Plant  
Daisies  
Evening primroses  
Globe Thistle  
Goldenrods  
Joe-Pye Weed  
Hibiscus  
Marigolds  
Moss roses  
Sedum  
Sunflowers  
Violets  
Zinnias



*"Do what we can, summer will have its flies."* --Ralph Waldo Emerson

# Fall

*"Autumn is a season followed immediately by looking forward to Spring."* - Anonymous

Fall may be the nicest time to be out working in a northeast garden. Temperatures are mild, there is less rush to get things done and there are less bugs. It's a pleasure to be outdoors, but there's a sense of melancholy in the air. All your hard work is about to be undone. Or is it?

You're at the final stage of your four season garden. This year you can go ahead and cut back the plants that didn't fare so well last winter. You've got your new evergreens and architectural elements in place, so you won't miss a few plants here and there.

Since you've planned for a winter garden, there's less of a sense of finality to fall gardening. You may be putting the garden to bed, but you are also setting the stage for the next tableau. You're not saying good by, just stepping back.

**Take More Photos:** But before you grab the pruners, grab a few more shots of the garden for evaluation this winter. Are your fall bloomers carrying you through the season? Did your cool season annuals, like petunias, nasturtiums, and pansies, rally again and provide a fall encore? What about the foliage. It wouldn't be a northeast fall if the leaves didn't take center stage. Do you have shrubs and perennials, like blueberries, oak leaf hydrangea, and amsonia, that dazzle?

**Mind the Gaps:** If you still need to fill in gaps in your four season planting plan, fall is the ideal time to plant trees and shrubs. The plants are going dormant, so all of their energy will be focused on growing roots and becoming established. No stress. As a bonus, nurseries want to clear out their stock and the whole lot will be on sale now.

**Time to Tidy:** As the weather takes its toll on your plants, it's time to face the inevitable. Time to clean garden. Get rid of any fallen plant debris. You don't want to provide hiding spots for pests and diseases. A tidy garden will really show off its bones, when laid bare. This includes cleaning up edges and pathways.

**Soften the Severity:** Have your frost-proof containers ready to fill with evergreen boughs and berries. Greet winter as another beautiful season in the garden, even if you view it at a distance. Slow the changeover from verdant to barren and then get those early blooming bulbs in, so winter can go out in a blaze.

Well done.

## Four Season Gardening Checklist - Fall

### Prep

- Clean and set out bird feeders
  
- Think about a de-icer for the birdbath or water garden.

### Plant

- Start planting spring flowering bulbs
- Plant trees and shrubs. Keep well watered, if there isn't sufficient rain.
- Fill bare spots with cool season annuals

### Persevere

- Begin cutting back anything that has finished blooming or is diseased
- Use your garden debris and leaves to start a new compost pile.
- Start raking. Shred or compost this fall gold.
- Dispose of any diseased or infested plant debris, to avoid overwintering the problem
- Amend your soil with a dressing of compost
- Take cuttings to overwinter indoors
- Divide and move perennials
- Dig and store tender bulbs like: dahlias, caladiums, cannas and tuberous begonias
- Collect and save seeds
- Clean and put away empty containers and garden ornaments.
- Keep watering trees and shrubs until the ground freezes

### Ponder

- Watch for frost warning and cover tender plants
- Photograph your garden's triumphs and frustrations

### Making Leaf Mold

Leaf mold may not sound like something you'd want in your garden, but it's simply fully decomposed leaves and it makes an excellent soil conditioner. It doesn't have much in the way of nutrients, but it works magic on soil's texture and water-holding capabilities.

Making leaf mold is even easier than making compost and we all know compost just happens.

1. Rake leaves into a pile.
2. Moisten the leaves.
3. Cover the pile.
4. Wait 6 - 10 months
5. Spread the finished leaf mold throughout the garden.

You can speed things up by storing the leaves in a bag. The paper leaf bags work well, although the bottoms will decompose with the leaves. If you use plastic bags, be sure to poke several holes, to allow air in.

One last tip, you wouldn't be the first gardener to ask your neighbors if you can take some of their unwanted leaves.



*"Autumn is a second spring  
when every leaf is a flower."* - Albert Camus

# What's Next

Stop by and join me at Gardening the Hudson Valley ([www.gardeningthehudsonvalley.com](http://www.gardeningthehudsonvalley.com)) for more seasonal tips and free resources to keep your garden budding with abundance.



## About the Author

Marie Iannotti is a former Cornell Cooperative Extension Horticulture Educator as well as a Master Gardener emeritus and gardening coach. She has been the gardening expert at [About.com](http://About.com) for a decade and has been writing no-nonsense tips for [Practically Gardening](http://Practically Gardening) almost as long.

To date, I've written two books:

- [\*\*The Beginner's Guide to Growing Heirloom Vegetables: The 100 Easiest-to-Grow, Tastiest-to-Eat Vegetables for Your Garden\*\*](#) (Timber Press, 2012)
- [\*\*The Timber Press Guide to Vegetable Gardening in the Northeast\*\*](#) (Timber Press, 2014)
- And I was a contributor to [\*\*Groundbeaking Food Gardens\*\*](#), by Niki Jabbour. (Storey Publishing, 2014)



I now write about the Hudson Valley. I've lived in this beautiful spot since I was a young child, except for a brief stint as a city girl, and consider myself a born again local. I'm a gardener who writes, photographs, and speaks about gardening. Slightly irreverent. Always enthusiastic.

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I hope you'll stop by [Gardening the Hudson Valley](http://Gardening the Hudson Valley) often and let me know how your garden is going. And be sure to check back for more seasonal updates.