

# THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



## LATE SUMMER GARDENING TO DOS

Many gardeners have experienced the excitement of the early growing season fade away as the summer progresses and autumn approaches. Perhaps the novelty of the growing season has worn off, or the heat of summer has our gardens and ourselves feeling worn down, or the garden abundance has made us complacent. However, if you can muster the energy and desire to keep growing, there are a number of activities to do in the landscape that will produce benefits now and in future growing seasons.

## LAWN MAINTENANCE

Turf grass lawns in the Midwest receive an abundance of attention during the summers but autumn is the best time to invest in maintenance activities that will rejuvenate a summer-worn lawn. For lawns that have thatch build-up or are growing on compacted soils, core aeration can help cut through the surface layer to open the root zone up to air and oxygen.

Areas of lawn that require reseeding will benefit from a fall planting. The warm soils and cooler air temperatures provide the perfect environment for cool-season grass species to germinate and develop a healthy root system. Use high-quality seed, distribute seed at the recommended rate, and maintain soil moisture as seeds germinate for the most success.



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## ORDER AND PLANT SPRING BULBS

It can be challenging to think about spring blossoms while the cool, crisp autumn air begs for pumpkin décor and flavoring. However, late September through mid-October is the best time to plant spring bulbs. Spring bulbs such as crocus, daffodil, tulip, and hyacinth require a chilling period prior to breaking dormancy. Spring bulbs can be artificially chilled in a refrigerator for six to eight weeks or the midwestern winter does the job on our behalf. Plant bulbs in groups and large masses to create the greatest visual impact in the landscape.



## PLANT GARLIC

Similar to the ornamental bulbs enjoyed in the spring, garlic requires a cold period. Plant garlic cloves six to eight weeks prior to the ground freezing. During these weeks, garlic cloves will begin to grow, giving them a head start to the spring growing season. Garlic will be ready to harvest mid-summer the following year. Cure newly harvested bulbs in a cool, dry, well-ventilated location for several weeks to prepare for storage. The largest and most robust cloves can be kept in a cool, dry, dark location and replanted from year to year.



## KEEP WEEDING

During the final months of the growing season, annual weeds are going to do their very best to produce flowers and seeds that will result in future generations. Some plants have the potential to produce hundreds of seeds and if left in the landscape, produce hundreds of weed seedlings the following year. The converse of this is true that if the seeds are not present in the landscape, they cannot germinate next year resulting in fewer weeds to manage.

Some desired plants also produce an abundance of viable seeds. Limit the amount of volunteer seedlings the following season by removing those seed heads too. However, it should be known that many of the seed heads that persist into the winter do provide a valuable food source to songbirds. If removed from the landscape, songbirds may be less likely to visit the landscape.



Fall is also a great time to control perennial weeds such as dandelions and creeping Charlie. Perennial plants are preparing for winter by moving carbohydrates into their root systems. During this time, a systemic herbicide will be more efficiently transported to the roots and produce more successful control results. For your safety and to comply with the law, remember to read the label for any chemical prior to application and follow all instructions, rates, and requirements.



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## DIVIDE PERENNIALS

Perennials provide an abundance of color, texture, and form in our landscape year after year but with time, plant performance may diminish. If this occurs, it may be a sign that it is time to divide the plant. Fall is a great time to divide many of our favorite garden perennials including peonies, iris, hostas, and daylilies.

To divide perennials, choose a cool, cloudy day to minimize the risk of plants and rootballs drying out. Dig up the parent plant with a sharp spade, lifting it out of the ground so extra soil can be removed from the roots. Divide the plant into smaller pieces by gently pulling the roots apart by hand, cutting them with a sharp, clean knife or spade, or working apart the parent plant with a garden fork. Keep divisions shaded and moist until replanting.

## REFRESH MULCH ON PRIZED PERENNIALS

Over the course of the summer, the layer of mulch applied to plants in the spring has helped maintain moisture in the soil, has 'shaded' the root systems to keep soil temperatures more moderate, and helped to suppress weeds. Natural mulch materials such as wood chips, straw, or leaf litter decompose over time. Reapplying wood mulch in the autumn around perennials, shrubs, and trees will help protect the root systems from harsh winter temperature fluctuations and conserve moisture in the soil helping them to overwinter.

Check existing mulch levels and reapply to reach a total depth of approximately four inches. Wait to reapply mulch until plants have gone dormant. Mulching earlier in the season can change soil conditions that may delay plant dormancy, risking winter damage.



## OUTSIDER ACTION

**Try these activities to be more of an Outsider:**

- Add a variety of pumpkins to your landscape for an easy, seasonal refresh.
- Reward your late-season gardening efforts with a refreshing taste of apple cider.

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