

# Work Isn't Done After Picking Last Garden Crop

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — When cold weather or frost spells the end of the growing season, a horticulture specialist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences advises gardeners to spend an extra day preparing the garden site for winter.

"Once you've made the decision to turn the garden under, it will take less than a day to really prepare the site for winter and for next spring," says Pete Ferretti, professor of vegetable crops.

Ferretti says backyard gardeners should harvest their crops and prepare to close the garden when nighttime temper-

atures reach 45 degrees Fahrenheit four to five days in a row, or if any frost is predicted.

Ferretti says most garden crops cannot thrive after cold injury. Crops that should be harvested include beans, cantaloupe, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, pumpkins, tomatoes, squash and watermelon.

"Some crops, such as endive, escarole and Brussels sprouts can be grown through colder temperatures," Ferretti says. "If you use row covers or even cornstalks to cover the crop, it can last into December."

Ferretti says it's up to homeowners to decide when to shut down their gardens. Depending

on the year, temperatures can remain warm well into October or a killing frost can come early in September.

"It's like the stock market," Ferretti says of gardening. "There's a point where you should ask yourself, 'Should I take my profits and run, or should I hang in there for a few more tomatoes and peppers?'"

Once the decision to pick all non-hardy crops has been made, Ferretti recommends taking a day to prepare the garden for next year. After picking everything that can possibly be used, follow these steps:

— **Diagnosis.** After final harvest, Ferretti suggests checking

plants for disease. If plants or fruits show major disease damage, the plants should be removed, placed in a plastic bag and thrown into the garbage.

— **Stop and chop.** Plants with minor or no disease damage should be cut down and chopped up. "You can use a sickle, hedge trimmer or lopping shears," Ferretti says. "You can even use a lawnmower to chop it finer if you are careful of stones and large pieces."

— **Turn it over.** Once the plants are chopped down, use a spade or a rototiller to turn the earth so organic breakdown of plant tissues can begin. "You can leave the surface rough," Ferretti advises. "It lessens erosion."

— **Plant Annual ryegrass.** Ferretti says annual ryegrass is a perfect cover crop for small gardens. "It comes up in seven days or so," he says. "It will be well-established by the time plants go dormant."

Ferretti says annual ryegrass produces a large rootmass, which keeps the soil loose. The roots also absorb phosphorus and attracts earthworms and microorganisms such as benefi-

cial fungi, bacteria, yeasts, algae and other organisms that make the soil richer. "Planting ryegrass nearly eliminates erosion," Ferretti says. "The root structure holds the soil together and allows water to soak in. If the soil is left bare, a crust will form and much of the water will run off."

— **Soil test.** After the garden is prepared for the winter, Ferretti recommends testing the soil for nutrient deficiency. Apply lime as soon as possible, if it's needed," he says. "You won't need to add other nutrients to the soil until early spring, but it's nice to know what you'll need ahead of time."

— **Add manure or compost (if needed).** Gardeners should add manure or compost to the garden site in late October or November. "By spring, the components will have broken down and been incorporated into the soil structure," Ferretti explains.

— **Starting the garden again.** By spring, Ferretti says, most of the annual ryegrass will have died, so gardeners can rototill or dig up the garden and plant new crops.

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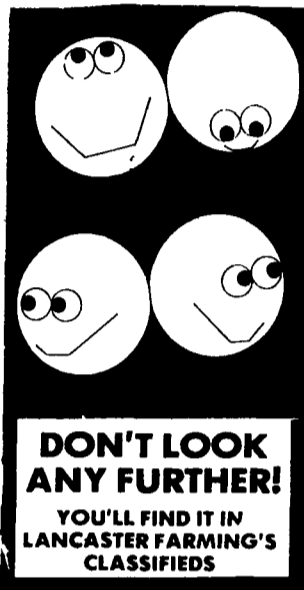
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