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# Things to do in November

Your expert guide to gardening this month



Halloween on a Devon allotment. Photograph by Howard Sooley

It has been so summery in October that we are in danger of being lulled into a false sense of security. No cold weather fronts yet appear on the horizon, no frost or icy nights are forecast, yet I learn that even the most experienced weather forecaster is stretched to prophesy the weather beyond the current week. So get the last of summer crops in and make sure that any plants that will be left out through winter have protection.

Order horticultural fleece or mesh fabrics to protect your plants. With the exceptions of the parsnip and the sprout - both of which are well known to improve with a good frosting - crops will be nicer to eat and keep going longer if they don't have to battle with the elements.



It is easy to knock up some mini polytunnels for localised protection. All you need are lengths of old hose pipe, or children's hoops cut in half, for the structure and a length of polythene or netting to cover. Stick the half hoops into the ground to make arches. Site

them in a north-south direction. Cover with the polythene or netting. Gather up the ends into a knot and secure them with sticks driven into the soil. Hold the sides down with stones. If all this sounds a bit too Blue Peter for you, you can [purchase little ones](#) that pull out concertina style. If you fancy a bit more of a challenge, it is not so difficult for a competent DIY person to make the [walk-in version](#), though you may need to get permission to erect it from the management first.

Save bubble wrap for insulating the cold frame or the greenhouse. Old plastic bottles with the bottoms sawn off make handy cloches for small plants. With a little patience you can make a [state of the art mini greenhouse](#) out of a few old CD cases and a tube of glue. Small plants can be covered over with hanging basket frames covered with polythene. It is also useful to have a store of newspapers and old blankets to hand for real emergencies. If conditions do turn seriously icy, they can be thrown over crops at night. Remember to remove them next day so the plants get some light. Lag downpipes from the shed to the water butt.



Cut down globe artichokes and pack straw around them in potentially cold areas. Net brassicas against hungry pigeons. Protect the curds of cauliflowers by tying the leaves over them. Dig up mint and chives and grow them on in containers at home or in the cold greenhouse. Put [cloches](#) over [parsley](#), [winter savory](#) and [chervil](#). Float a ball in the pond to prevent it freezing over. Check that stakes are firm and that ties are secure but not too tight. Remove yellowing leaves from brassicas to discourage disease and dispose of them (not on the compost heap). Insulate your winter saladini by growing it on polystyrene. You can get it free from fishmongers or anyone having a washing machine or fridge delivered.

Unless you are on the no-dig system or have light soil, this is the best month to carry on digging before the ground gets too wet and soggy. If the digging is left rough, the frosts will break it down further and the birds will enjoy clearing up the soil-borne pests. [Mr Middleton](#), the first celebrity gardener with his weekly broadcast on the Home Service, claims in his book *Digging for Victory – Wartime Gardening with Mr Middleton*, that a hard winter on newly dug soil is better than a dose of fertilizer, especially if it can penetrate deeply. A common fault, he advises, is to take too much at a time on the spade. Drive your spade in vertically to its full length and turn it over completely. The rougher you leave the ground the better. If you are planning to use lime, this is the time to apply it. Leave the manure and compost until spring. Lime and manure don't mix.



Build a new compost heap and collect leaves for leaf mould. If you need more, local councils are generally willing to deliver leaves from the parks in bulk free-of-charge to [allotments](#). [Leafmould](#) is very useful stuff. It makes a water retaining mulch, improving water retention by up to 50%. When mixed into heavy soil it lightens it, helping the porosity and air holding capacity. It makes a good peat substitute. Before you could buy compost in plastic bags, gardeners prized it as an ingredient in their [home-made seed compost](#).

The leaves are broken down into leafmould by the slow action of fungi as opposed to the fast bacterial decomposition of the compost heap. So it will take a good year transform itself into leaf mould. Left for a second year, it will become unrecognizable as leaves and turn into leaf compost, suitable for using in seed and potting compost.

When raking up the leaves take care not to disturb any [leafy habitats](#) under hedges. Don't prune back sources of food - winter berries, seedheads - as well as plants that provide shelter and cover. The birds and mini beasts will be looking out now for cosy winter quarters and roosts. They won't be fooled by an Indian summer.

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**Syddery**

2 November 2009 8:53PM

Hi. Ref work to do this month. Have tidied away all the herbaceous perennials, spread the contents of the compost bin and replaced it with these. Everything is ship shape for the Spring. Look forward always to seeing the old friends reappear then, does the garden ever look better than when all this lovely new foliage and colour reappears?. There is a nice framework of evergreens to keep the plot looking nicely clothed all winter.

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