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Things to do in November

Your expert guide to edible gardening this month



Time to sweep up your windfall apples Photograph: Graeme Robertson

As the soil still retains some warmth in November, tackle any earthworks. Get any winter digging finished while the going is still good. Use up last years compost and incorporate it or lay it on top for the worms to take down. Then start a new heap.

Sweep up all your leaves for leaf mould. For a quicker result, run over them with a mower. If the mower has a grass box, you won't even need to pick them up. It is best to do this when the leaves are dry so they don't clog the mower. Don't forget to water the leaves afterwards before stashing them away.

Although leaf mould contains few nutrients, it makes an excellent mulch after a year needing little further attention other than a little watering in dry periods in summer and the occasional turn. If left for a second year, it will make a good substitute for peat as a 'bulking agent'. When sieved and mixed with equal parts of sharp sand/perlite and compost, it makes good seed and potting compost.

Mark out where you will be growing beans next year and make a bean trench about one spit deep and 45cm (18ins) wide. Dig it out, line it with wet newspaper and top with some rotted compost. Then add fresh kitchen scraps throughout winter. Keep it vegetarian to avoid anything that might attract rats. In spring, cover with soil and plant away. Beans or the cucurbits (courgette family) will revel in the luxury of the resulting rich, deeply dug, deliciously moist compost.

As the apple season comes to an end, clear the crop entirely. Even if you don't want all the apples, don't leave any on the tree over winter or any windfalls to rot on the ground. Rotting apples may result in canker or brown rot (Monilinia fruitigena) – a widespread fungal disease. It finds its way into damaged fruits, typically those pecked at by birds. The spores will overwinter in the fruit and re-infect the tree in spring. The same fungus can cause wither tip and blossom wilt.

For good measure put on grease bands to protect the apples, plums, pears and cherries from the winter moth. The females crawl up the trunks and lay their eggs in crevices, under the bark or in lichen. The larvae hatch in spring and dive into the leaves. They produce a silken thread and disperse by a method known as 'ballooning' on air currents. They will feed on any tree but are a particular pest in apple orchards. Wrap the grease bands securely around both bark and the stake at height of about 45 cm (18ins).

Although you can winter prune throughout the dormant season, this is as good a month as any to get the job done, also to plant new young trees before the heavy frosts. Espaliers and other trained forms are usually pruned in the New Year.

December and January this year is forecast to be colder than usual so don't neglect to take all the usual protective measures against cold. Lag pipes. Check the shed for leaks. Put a ball in the pond to stop it freezing over. If it does freeze, don't shatter the ice as this will send shock waves to its unsuspecting residents. Cover compost bins to keep the action going.

Put cloches, netting or fleece over young plants. If you have outdoor plants in containers, move them into the greenhouse, home, or to the sunniest spot. They won't survive frozen soil. Crowd them together for warmth. Plant them, pots and all, until spring, or raise them on bricks and protect them with mulches or covers. Raise greenhouse plants on a sheet of polystyrene or grow them in polystyrene fish boxes (available from markets and fishmongers).

Make sure that stakes and ties are in place but not too tight. 'Double glaze' the greenhouse with a layer of bubble wrap. The bubbles make an effective extra layer of air to keep the cold out.

If you are on a windy site put up wind breaks. For instant results, proprietary netting is effective but quite expensive. However, any strong net to hand, or even a length of

hessian, will filter the wind and dampen its ardour.

Best of all for breaking the cutting edge of the wind are hedges and shrubs. They double up as cosy winter habitats and bird larders stocked with berries and hips. They are even better if they have some holly, ivy or guelder rose growing through them. If you are on chalk or limestone, think about planting a juniper, a declining British native, providing valuable winter berries. Birds need a good supply of nourishing food – oil rich seeds, nuts, millet and suet – for a quick energy boost in autumn and winter.

It is important that we all make a big effort as a hard winter takes its toll. The RSPB reckons that a million bird lives are saved every year by the very many good people who take care to feed them.

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