

Sustainable Gardening

The United Nations defines sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainable gardening is comprised of practices designed to nourish and replenish the local natural environment. Sustainable gardening practices conserve natural resources and seek to improve soil and water quality. Increasing biodiversity is another key component of sustainable gardening.

Encouraging soil health is a cornerstone of sustainability. Enrich the soil by incorporating compost instead of fertilizer. Get a soil test to find out the pH of the soil as well as the need for any amendments. Soil test information is available at the beginning of this calendar. Cover crops help to store carbon in the vegetable patch off-season. Allow fallen leaves to remain in the garden as insulation and a source of nutrients as the leaves decay. The leaves also supply winter habitat for many species that benefit our summer gardens.

Sustainable gardening promotes the use of more efficient watering practices such as soaker hoses and drip irrigation that direct water to the plant roots. Sprinkler systems wet leaves and waste water through evaporation. Wet leaves can lead to disease and other plant problems.

Remove invasive plant species that often overtake natives. Several invasives, such as *Euonymus alatus* (burning bush) and *Buddleia davidii* (butterfly bush), are still being sold in nurseries. Birds eat the seeds and spread them to any bare soil where they out-compete natives.

Native plants are an important part of sustainable gardening. They support native wildlife, including birds and butterflies. Native plants are adapted to the local climate and soil conditions. They require less water and no pesticides. Wildlife uses grasses, small twigs and other organic matter to build nests and safe spaces. Butterflies need specific native host plants to lay their eggs, as well as nectar plants to feed on. Native berry-bearing shrubs and trees are not only lovely to look at, but also supply food for wildlife in the winter. Mulching with native groundcovers keeps the soil stable.

Lawns do not support wildlife. They consume water resources and are costly to maintain. Try replacing part of the lawn with a pollinator garden. These practices, along with changing to electric or hand-operated garden or lawn equipment, help us be more sustainable, for both ourselves and future generations.

Checklist for December

Flower and Vegetable Garden

- ✓ Store bulbs, tubers and corms at 45-50°F to prevent sprouting. If shriveling occurs, rewrap in paper bags with damp peat moss.

Indoor Plants

- ✓ Groom and clean indoor plants as needed. Don't overwater; let soil dry to keep plants fungus gnat free.
- ✓ Keep your Christmas cactus and poinsettia in bright natural light for best leaf and flower development.
- ✓ Keep your Christmas tree stand full of water.
- ✓ Recycle your cut Christmas tree according to your town's guidelines.
- ✓ Place a pre-chilled bulb into a jar with stones at the bottom. Fill with water to just reach the bulb bottom. Enjoy!

Lawn & Garden

- ✓ Place row covers over strawberries.
- ✓ Continue to water young, newly planted trees and shrubs until the ground freezes.
- ✓ Inspect and clean your gardening tools. Sharpen them now to be ready for next year.
- ✓ Store cut firewood outdoors to prevent insects from coming inside.
- ✓ Store birdseed in metal cans with tight fitting lids.