

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

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Fungal diseases and immature insects live during the fall and winter in spent vegetable and flower debris. Over wintering disease and insects put future crops at risk, but can easily be avoided with a few simple tasks.

Clean-up of spent garden and floral debris is a very important task in the fall reducing diseases and insect pests that seem to be a consistent problem for home gardeners. Now is the time to clean spent vegetable and floral debris for those that are not continuing with a fall garden.

Take time to construct a compost bin and compost the spent garden materials and leaves. Add soil and fertilizer periodically turning the heap to accelerate the decaying process. Compost is a natural source of nutrients for plants. More information about composting can be found at this web site: <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/pdf/ag-467.pdf>

Deep plowing spent gardens and flower beds reduce the incidence of disease and insect problems. This cultural practice smothers many of the fungal spores that cause problems in the summer such as southern stem blight.

Exposure to freezing weather kills and greatly reduces over-wintering fungal spores and many species of insect larva. Plowing and exposing roots of weeds and other debris also kills nematodes.

Plant a cover crop as soon as the soil is workable. Cover crops such as annual rye, rye grain, wheat, clover, or oats reduce erosion and add much needed organic matter when plowed under as green manures in the spring. Green manures help also improve the tilth or workability to the soil.

Research has proven that certain cover crops reduce certain weed populations in many crops. For example wheat cover crops seem to reduce certain broadleaf weed populations in early spring plantings.

Now is also a good time to have soil tested for next spring's planting. Home gardeners need to sample every two to three years. Soil sampling saves time and reduces unnecessary nutrients into the environment as well as dollars in producing ornamental and edible crops. Soil sampling kits are available from Cooperative Extension at the Agriculture Center on Old Concord Road in Salisbury. Soil samples are sent by homeowners for testing to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture in Raleigh. More information is available from this on-line publication: <http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/agcomm/publications/Ag-614.pdf>

Reports arrive in a few weeks now, however, the closer to spring planting, the later it takes to receive and implement the results because most wait until just before planting.

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