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T·H·E D·I·R·T

Newsletter of Master Gardener Volunteers of CCE Schoharie and Otsego Counties

Gardening · Environment · Community · Sustainability · Education

Preparing Young Trees and Shrubs for Winter

As autumn transitions into winter across Schoharie and Otsego counties, our landscapes brace for harsh winds, snow and ice, and freezing temperatures. While mature, deeply rooted trees can withstand the brutal upstate New York winter, young trees and shrubs require extra protection.

Young plants have thin bark, shallow root systems, and flexible

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Grow with us! Subscribe for gardening tips, pollinator-friendly ideas, and local wisdom for Otsego & Schoharie counties in Central New York.

Growing Fresh Herbs Indoors: Cuttings, Seeds & Overwintering

Just because the temperatures are dropping doesn't mean you have to give up fresh herbs until spring! If you've been enjoying homegrown herbs all summer, you can bring some of that goodness indoors without digging up your entire herb garden.

In fact, one of the easiest ways to keep some of your favorites growing is to start new plants from cuttings. Others are better grown from seed, and a few can simply make the move indoors in their existing pots.

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Example of a Bug Snug

Build a Bug Snug!

As temperatures drop, many of our native pollinators are looking for a safe place to spend the winter. While some butterflies migrate south, most native bees, butterflies, moths, and other beneficial insects stay right here, tucked away in leaf litter, hollow stems, soil, and other sheltered spots.

To give them a helping hand consider building a "bug snug" in a quiet corner of your yard! Start with a small pile of fallen branches, twigs, and logs. Add some dry leaves, pieces of bark, and hollow plant stems, leaving little gaps and crevices where insects can find shelter. Place your bug snug somewhere protected from strong winds and disturbance, preferably near your garden or native plants.

These shelters can provide hiding places for overwintering beetles, solitary bees, and other beneficial insects. Depending on the species, they may spend winter as eggs, larvae, pupae, or adults, waiting for warmer temperatures to return.

There's no need to make it pretty! Leave your bug snug undisturbed through winter and into spring, and let nature do the rest. ■

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branches that make them highly vulnerable to frost, fluctuating temperatures, and hungry winter wildlife. Taking the time to fortify your young woody plants now ensures they survive the winter and thrive next spring.

Hydration Before the Hard Freeze

The most critical step in winter preparation actually happens before the ground freezes. Evergreens continue to lose moisture through their needles all winter long via a process called transpiration. If the ground is frozen, their roots cannot replace that lost water, leading to winter drying and desiccation (winter burn).

- Deep Watering: Provide young trees and shrubs with a deep soaking once a week until the ground freezes hard, usually in late November. Target the root zone, ensuring the water penetrates several inches deep.
- Deciduous Trees Need Water Too: Even though deciduous trees drop their leaves, their root systems still need adequate moisture to withstand freezing soil temperatures.

Mulching for Root Insulation

Winter's repeated freezing and thawing can cause "frost heaving," which pushes shallow-rooted plants out of the ground and exposes their roots to freezing temperatures. A layer of mulch helps insulate the soil and reduce these temperature swings. Follow the 3-3-3 rule: spread about 3 inches of organic mulch in a 3-foot circle around the plant, leaving at least 3 inches of space between the mulch and trunk. Avoid the dreaded "mulch volcano!" Piling mulch against the bark traps moisture and can encourage rot, disease, and rodent damage.

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Defending Thin Bark Against Sunscald and Frost Cracking

On sunny winter days, the sun can warm the bark on the south and southwest sides of trees. When temperatures drop quickly after sunset, the sudden change can damage the tissue beneath the bark, causing sunscald or cracking. Young, thin-barked trees like maples, cherries, and lindens are especially vulnerable. Protect their trunks with white plastic tree guards or commercial tree wrap to reflect sunlight and reduce temperature swings. Just remember to remove the wrap in early spring to prevent moisture buildup and insect problems.

Animal Barriers: Mice, Voles, and Deer

When winter food gets scarce, your trees and shrubs can become an easy meal. Mice and voles chew bark near the base of trees, sometimes causing enough damage to kill them, while deer browse tender branches and rub their antlers against young trunks. Protect trees from rodents with a cylinder of ¼-inch hardware cloth, buried 2–3 inches into the soil and extending above the expected snow line. For deer, sturdy wire cages or tall fencing offer protection. Vulnerable evergreens like arborvitae can also benefit from burlap barriers supported by stakes to help shield them from browsing and drying winter winds. ■

Mum's the Word

Is it even fall in Upstate NY without mums? These colorful fall favorites are everywhere this time of year, brightening up porches, walkways, and garden beds with gorgeous shades of yellow, orange, red, pink, and purple. And when so many of our summer flowers are calling it quits, mums are just getting started!

Garden Mums vs. Florist Mums: What's the Difference?

Not all mums are created equal! Garden mums, sometimes called hardy mums, are bred to grow outdoors and can return year after year when planted in suitable conditions. Florist mums, on the other hand, are typically grown for indoor displays and cut flowers. They're generally not hardy enough to survive our Upstate NY winters.

If you're hoping for mums that come back next year, look for varieties specifically labeled as hardy

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Putting the Garden to Bed

Before you officially call it quits in the garden, there are a few things worth taking care of. A little time spent winterizing your tools and watering equipment now can save money and headaches come spring.

Start with your garden tools. Scrape off dirt and debris from shovels, hoes, and pruners, then wash and dry them thoroughly. Disinfect cutting tools with 70% rubbing alcohol to prevent spreading disease. Sharpen dull blades and apply a light coat of oil to metal surfaces to prevent rust. Sand rough wooden handles and rub them with linseed oil to help prevent cracking.

Don't forget your watering equipment! Disconnect and drain garden hoses before storing them. Remove timers and splitters from outdoor faucets, and shut off and drain exterior water lines where possible. Empty rain barrels and drip irrigation systems to prevent freezing damage. ■

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garden mums. Even then, winter survival isn't guaranteed, especially when they're planted late in the season.

Tips for Keeping Your Mums Looking Great

Want to enjoy those beautiful blooms as long as possible? A little care goes a long way.

- Buy buds, not blooms. It's tempting to grab the biggest, brightest plant at the store, but mums covered in unopened buds will give you a longer show. Those already in full bloom may look amazing today, but they'll fade sooner.

Keep them watered. Potted mums dry out surprisingly fast, especially those packed with blooms. Check the soil regularly and water thoroughly when the top inch feels dry. Aim for the soil rather than soaking the flowers and foliage.

Give them sunshine. Mums love the sun! Aim for at least six hours of direct sunlight daily to keep them healthy and blooming their best.

Can You Keep Your Mums for Next Year?

Absolutely! Well, sometimes. Hardy garden mums are perennials, but surviving our Upstate NY winters can be tricky, especially for those purchased in full bloom in October. Planting in late summer gives roots a better chance to establish before winter.

For mums already in the ground, leave the dead stems standing and add a few inches of loose mulch after the ground freezes. Have potted mums? Try storing them in a cool, protected garage or shed where the roots won't freeze solid, watering occasionally to prevent drying out. Come spring, trim back dead growth and plant them outdoors. There's no guarantee, but with a little luck, you'll enjoy those blooms again next fall! ■

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Here's how to get started:

1. Choose a healthy stem. Look for fresh, non-flowering growth about 4–6 inches long. Avoid woody, damaged, or flowering stems.
2. Make your cut. Snip just below a leaf node (the spot where leaves attach to the stem), then remove the leaves from the bottom 2 inches.
3. Place it in water or soil. Basil and mint root easily in a glass of water. For rosemary, thyme, sage, and oregano, a moist, well-draining seed-starting or propagation mix is often more reliable. Keep the buried leaves off the stem.
4. Find a bright spot. Give your cuttings bright, indirect light and keep them away from cold drafts. For water cuttings, change the water every few days. For soil cuttings, keep the mix lightly moist, not soggy.
5. Watch for roots! Basil and mint often develop roots in 1–2 weeks. Oregano and thyme may take 2–4 weeks, while rosemary and sage can take 4–8 weeks or longer. Rooting times vary depending on temperature, light, and plant health.
6. Pot them up. Once water-grown roots are about 1–2 inches long, carefully transfer your cuttings into small pots with drainage holes. For soil-grown cuttings, new growth and gentle resistance when tugged are signs that roots are developing.

Not every cutting will make it, so take a few extras! Since we've had a hard frost, tender herbs like basil may be done for the season. But hardier herbs like thyme, sage, and oregano may still have healthy growth you can use for cuttings. Just be sure to choose stems that haven't been damaged by freezing temperatures.

Some Herbs Are Better Started from Seed

Not every herb grows well from cuttings. Cilantro, dill, and parsley are generally better started from

seed, while basil is easy to grow either way. Parsley can take 2–4 weeks to germinate, so be patient! And remember, seedlings need time to grow before harvesting. A grow light will help keep them happy through our short Upstate NY winter days.

Bringing Whole Plants Inside

Potted rosemary, thyme, oregano, and sage can often make the move indoors. Check for pests, rinse the foliage, and keep plants separate from other houseplants for a couple of weeks. Place them in a sunny window or under a grow light, and avoid overwatering. Some hardy perennial herbs can also survive outdoors in Zone 5b, depending on the variety and growing conditions.

With a few cuttings, some seeds, or a happy potted herb, you can keep fresh flavors growing all winter long. And snipping fresh herbs for dinner in January? That's a pretty nice perk! ■

Garden Chore Checklist

November is when the garden finally starts slowing down here in Central NY. With freezing temps and the growing season mostly behind us, it's time to finish a few last chores, protect what needs protecting, and enjoy a well-earned break!

Vegetable Garden

- Harvest any remaining cold-hardy crops like kale, carrots, parsnips, and Brussels sprouts before the ground freezes solid.
- Check stored potatoes, squash, and other produce regularly for signs of spoilage.
- Finish planting garlic if the ground is still workable, and mulch planted beds for winter protection.
- Make notes about what grew well, what didn't, and what to change next year.

Soil & Garden Care

- Cover any remaining bare garden soil with shredded leaves or organic mulch to protect it through winter.
- Water newly planted trees and shrubs during dry stretches until the ground freezes.
- Protect young trees from rodents and deer with trunk guards or fencing.
- Drain and store hoses, rain barrels, and irrigation equipment before prolonged freezing temperatures.
- Clean, sharpen, and store garden tools so they're ready for spring.
- Leave healthy perennial stems, seed heads, and leaf litter in place for wildlife.

Pest & Disease Watch

- Remove any remaining diseased vegetable debris and rotting fruit from the garden.
- Check young trees for signs of rodent damage and make sure protective barriers are secure.
- Avoid unnecessary digging or disturbing garden beds where beneficial insects may be overwintering.

Find more gardening guidance at Cornell Garden Based Learning https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/garden-guidance/. ■

Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer

QUESTION: Is it too late to plant spring-flowering bulbs?

ANSWER: Not necessarily! Tulips, daffodils, and other spring bulbs can still be planted in November as long as the ground isn't frozen. Choose a well-drained spot, plant bulbs about 3x as deep as their height, and water after planting. A little work now means stunning blooms come spring!

To ask a Master Gardener a question, visit: https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program/ask-a-master-gardener-volunteer

Planning Next Year's Garden

The garden may be winding down for the year, but that doesn't mean you have to stop thinking about it! In fact, late fall and winter are great times to start planning for next season. With the pressure of planting, weeding, and harvesting behind you, there's finally time to think about what worked, what didn't, and what you'd like to do differently next year.

Look Back Before Looking Ahead

Before this growing season becomes a distant memory, take a few minutes to reflect. Which vegetables produced more than you could eat? Which varieties struggled? Did you spend the summer giving away zucchini while wishing you'd planted more tomatoes?

Think about any pest or disease problems you encountered, too. Keeping a few notes now can save you from repeating the same mistakes next year. And if you haven't already, snap a few photos of your garden before the snow arrives. It's surprisingly easy to forget exactly where everything was planted!

Give Your Plants a Change of Scenery

If you grow vegetables, crop rotation is worth considering as you plan next year's layout. Growing the same plant families in the same spot year after year can contribute to nutrient imbalances and allow certain pests and diseases to build up in the soil.

For example, tomatoes and peppers belong to the same family, as do cucumbers and squash. Beans and peas are another group. Ideally, rotate these families to different beds on a three- to four-year cycle when space allows.

You don't need a fancy garden design program. A simple sketch showing where everything grew this year can make planning next year's garden much easier.

Don't Forget About the Soil

Healthy soil is the foundation of a productive garden, and winter gives you time to figure out what yours might need. If your plants struggled or yields were disappointing, consider getting a soil test. Rather than guessing which fertilizers or amendments to add, you'll have a better understanding of your soil's nutrient levels and pH.

It's also a good time to think about compost. Will your raised beds need topping off? Do you have enough finished compost ready for spring, or will you need another source?

Dream a Little (and Check Your Seed Stash!)

One of the best parts of winter gardening? Seed catalogs! Before you start circling everything that catches your eye, though, take inventory of what you already have.

Many vegetable seeds remain viable for several years when stored somewhere cool, dry, and dark, although some, like onions and parsnips, lose viability more quickly.

As you browse, look for varieties suited to our Upstate NY growing season, especially those with resistance to diseases you've dealt with in the past. Popular varieties can sell out early, so planning ahead has its advantages.

And remember, you don't have to overhaul your entire garden every year. Sometimes the best plan is simply growing more of what you love, less of what you don't, and trying one or two new things. After all, half the fun of gardening is imagining what next year's garden could be! ■

Community Events

November 18, 2026
Cut Flower Webinar
(Zoom)

November 24, 2026
Board of Directors Meeting
123 Lake St, Cooperstown, NY

See the full list of upcoming community events: https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/events

Weather Watch

October brings frosty nights, shorter days, and the end of the growing season in Upstate New York. Watch for freezes, finish harvesting tender crops, and take advantage of mild days to get those last garden chores done. *Visit the NRCC : https://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/index.html*

Dates	Weather Conditions
Nov 1-7	Snow showers north, sunny south; cold
Nov 8-14	Rainy periods, mild
Nov 15-24	Rain and snow showers, chilly
Nov 25-30	Rain showers, then snowy; mild, then colder
November	Temp 38.5° (-0.5 avg) Precip 2.5" (-0.5 avg)

Master Gardener
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Grow With Us on Social Media!

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https://www.facebook.com/CCESchoharieMG

Our Mission

We prepare volunteers to be peer educators who build relationships with community audiences to integrate local experience and research-based knowledge in planning for and initiating steps to manage gardens, lawns, and landscapes with an emphasis on food security and environmental stewardship.

Learn more about the CCE Master Gardener Volunteer programs of Otsego & Schoharie counties here: https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program

CCESO Master Gardeners Volunteers are trained to share research-based gardening knowledge with the community. We answer questions through the "Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer" service, teach classes, and maintain demonstration gardens in Cooperstown and Cobleskill. You'll find us at farmers markets, fairs, and local events offering practical tips, and we also grow plants for fundraisers, lead beginner gardener programs, and offer soil testing to help neighbors grow with confidence.

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