



Autumn yawns into winter once again, which means heading outdoors requires more planning and more preparation. As temperatures continue to drop, here are three ways to enjoy an autumn walk and make the most of the lingering plants, flowers, and shrubs.

1. **Learn What's Still In-Season**

Take your favorite guidebook with you on your next stroll and practice identifying common autumn plants like aster, goldenrod, and black-eyed susans.

2. **Dress for the Weather**

Don't let the cold stop you from enjoying the great outdoors. Wear warm layers and stay hydrated to give yourself plenty of time to exercise, plant winter crops, and enjoy the sun.

3. **Bring a Friend**

Maintain friendships and make new memories by inviting friends, neighbors, and loved ones on walks with you. Want to make the experience even more fun? See who can spot the most unique birds, animals, or plants on your adventure!

Article and Photo by: Annie Fairfax

The Oakland Gardener

November 2025

Monthly Plant Feature

Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree



Article by: Jamiel Dado
Photo by: Melanie Fuhrmann & Unsplash

As the costumes get hung back up and the jack o' lanterns get composted, thoughts turn to the next round of the holiday season. Presents are procured, decorations are dusted off, and the search begins for the most perfect of ornament vessels, the Christmas tree. If you are reading this, chances are that you have already decided to go with a real tree instead of the "plastic fantastic" alternative. However, your head is now probably swimming with questions like, "what kind of tree?", "when is the best time to purchase it?", "how do I keep it fresh?", and perhaps most importantly, "what compels me to even do this at all?"

Let's start with the most confounding **mystery**. You may or may not have wondered what dragging a tree into your home and decorating it has to do with Christmas. Well, actually very little. The holiday that relied on evergreens as an important symbol was the winter solstice. Various civilizations utilized them long before Christianity emerged. In fact, Christians only began using evergreens as the religion spread amongst former pagans that wanted to hold onto certain solstice traditions. The most direct reason we hold the Christmas tree so dear in modern times can be credited to Queen Victoria and her husband, Albert who famously were depicted decorating one with their children in 1848. What then began as fashionable mimicry, soon became ingrained tradition. So, it seems that people are generally compelled to do it and have been for as long as we remember.



When looking for a tree for your home, you luckily never have to travel very far. There seems to be tree lots just about everywhere this time of year. You can even bring the family to a tree farm and cut down your own festive evergreen if that's what you're into. The only hard part of this process is deciding what kind of tree you want. There are so many to choose from, with varieties of firs, pines,

and spruces that are bound to appeal to the most traditional of yuletide aficionados. This helpful **link** further breaks down the multitude of choices our state has to offer. Factors that are worth considering are how well the tree retains its needles during the season, how well the branches support your ornaments, and of course, any budgetary concerns you might have.

Once you have decided what kind of tree you are looking for, it's important to time your purchase along with how you celebrate the holiday. On average, a real tree that is properly taken care of can **last** in your house for three to four weeks. Once the needles become dry and brittle, it's time to remove the tree from your house.

To ensure that you get the absolute most out of your festive purchase, there are several **steps** you can take to extend your enjoyment. It is perhaps most important to make sure that you are getting the freshest tree possible. The

easiest way to do this is obviously cutting it down yourself, or at least witnessing the operation. If this is not feasible, or you would just rather go to your closest tree lot, then a simple test involving gently pulling on one of the shoots will do the trick. If needles are easily coming off, then this is not very fresh and will not last as long in your house.

Similarly to cut flowers, trees need plenty of water to remain fresh. In fact, they require about a quart of water per day for every inch of diameter of the trunk. Don't worry about adding anything special to the water you use, tap is completely fine. It's worth noting that for the tree to easily absorb the water it needs, it should have about an inch cut from the bottom at purchase. Most tree lots will do this for you, but if for whatever reason they don't, make sure that you do before you place your tree in its stand.

Extension Master Gardener News



Yad Ezra: A Politely Relentless Effort to End Hunger

Article by: Leah Blinstrub

Photo by: Josh Gordon

Oz Pearlman said, "The world rewards the politely relentless," and that is what Yad Ezra is: politely relentless. With the mission of a "Jewish community with no hunger," Yad Ezra is a kosher food pantry, a garden, and a group of people who have used every speck of what is available to provide for their clients. Yad Ezra began in 1990 as a staff and volunteer-run program. Today, Yad Ezra provides on average 1,500 families per month with food, healthcare items, and household goods. Families were receiving food essentials, but a growing desire was felt for more fresh produce.

The Growing Gardens initiative began in December 2019 to increase access to nutrient-rich, seasonal foods. The garden started as a small concrete plot of land that became a greenhouse. The greenhouse was planted with culturally appropriate, fresh food crops. Clients were so thrilled with the access to fresh beets, radishes, kohlrabi, herbs, and eggplant that they were inspired to expand. The use of an easement allowed for a small food forest. Apple trees were planted; grapes, rhubarb, and walking onions were added to provide increased farm-to-table options for the hungry community.

Permission was given by neighbors for the use of odds and ends of land space. Client-focused food production drives everything garden manager Josh Gordon grows. When space was available, pollinator gardens were created. An intentional decision was made to grow more fresh herbs for cooking. When deciding how to use the leftover dried herbs, tea blends were tried. The community loved the tea so much that it became a beloved focus of the garden,

with volunteer groups like the Girl Scouts helping to process the herbs and make the tea.

Eventually, space was made available for five raised bed gardens, allowing clients to “check out” a bed and grow their own crops. A garden resource program was started, delivering 2,000 plants and seeds for personal growth. Education was provided, compost made available, and a “tool share” was initiated. Gordon noted every addition was a conscious effort to remove barriers from family food production.

With each passing year, additions to space were made — always to provide clients with the food they desired. Our Lady of La Salette Church allowed clean-up and use of their 1-acre plot. Volunteers helped plan and organize the use of client favorites, such as goji berry plants, elderberries, service berries, gooseberries, and currants. Today, the Giving Gardens along with many volunteers, manage 10 separate places for food growth. From June through October, a special CSA-style market runs for clients to come and choose the produce options they want. This provides clients with an opportunity for face-to-face time with Yad Ezra members to discuss the foods they prefer. Gordon said one of the most surprising revelations was the community’s love of mushrooms. This preference led to dedicated greenhouse space for year-round mushroom production.

Yad Ezra, in Hebrew, means helping hands. This community-based, client-centered food initiative is truly inspiring. Growing food with care for a community in need relies on volunteer support. If you’d like to be a part of this incredible volunteer opportunity, Yad Ezra could use your help. Visit **Yad Ezra** for additional information or contact Josh Gordon at josh@yadezra.org.

Gardening Tips and Tricks

Garden Boosting Gold Compost

Article by: Pat Grayer Wilson

Photos by: Unsplash

Tired of shelling out big bucks for bags of nutrient-packed soil just to keep your garden thriving? Here’s a secret: you can create your own rich, healthy compost all winter long—while you kick back, put your feet up, and enjoy a hot cup of coffee. Winter **composting** might sound tricky because of the cold, but with a little planning, it’s surprisingly simple and low-maintenance.

The key is **balancing** green materials like veggie scraps, coffee grounds, and leftover pumpkins or squash with brown materials such as shredded paper, straw, and those crunchy fall leaves you’ve just raked up. In composting,



this balance is known as the carbon-to-nitrogen ratio (C:N ratio), and most successful compost systems hover around a ratio of approximately 25-30 parts carbon to 1 part nitrogen. You don't need to measure, of course—just think of using more browns than greens. This balance creates the ideal environment for the naturally occurring microorganisms that break everything down.



Those autumn leaves are compost gold—they provide essential carbon and soak up moisture, keeping your pile healthy through chilly weather. Leaves also create small air pockets that increase oxygen flow, which compost microbes need to function. On the other side of the balance, pumpkins break down quickly and add

valuable nutrients, especially when chopped into smaller pieces, so don't throw out your old jack-o'-lanterns! Pumpkin flesh is particularly high in nitrogen and natural sugars, which give compost bacteria an energy boost.

Insulation keeps the compost process moving. Place your compost pile in a sunny spot, insulate it with blankets, straw, or a tarp to trap heat and moisture, and turn it gently every few weeks. Heat is generated naturally by microbial activity—specifically by thermophilic bacteria that thrive between 104-140°F. By insulating your pile, you help these tiny workers stay active longer into the winter months. Even if it freezes, don't worry—once it thaws, the microbes will spring back to life. Freezing actually helps rupture plant cell walls, making the organic material easier for microbes to break down later.

By early spring, earthworms and beneficial fungi will also return to the pile, further enriching its structure and fertility. Earthworms are natural soil engineers—they aerate the compost as they tunnel through it, breaking down organic matter into a nutrient-rich substance called castings, which are incredibly valuable for plant growth. Beneficial fungi, including mycorrhizal fungi, help form networks that improve soil structure and increase a plant's ability to absorb nutrients and water. Their presence signals that your compost is not only breaking down but also transforming into a living, thriving soil ecosystem. This is where compost truly moves from being “broken-down scraps” to becoming a biologically active soil amendment that nourishes plants from the ground up.

So, while you're snug indoors, feeling gloriously smug about escaping the frigid cold, your compost is outside quietly doing its thing—transforming into rich, garden-boosting gold—just in time for spring. And the best part? It's absolutely free.



“Just what do I do with all of the leaves?”

Article by: Louise Sloan

Photos by: Unsplash

You aren't alone if this question haunts you this time of year. The answer is surprisingly simple: mulch the leaves back into your lawn. Multiple university extension offices

have researched the efficacy of mulching leaves into the lawn. Results point to

multiple positive outcomes. Leaves mulched and left on the lawn offer up to 25% of a lawn's fertilization requirements. In essence, the spent beauty of fall is free food for your turf. **MSU's Smart Gardening** explains another benefit of mulched leaves in a lawn: weed suppression. The mulched leaves cover the bare spots that exist on lawns which in turn prevent weed germination. Surprisingly, MSU's research discovered a 100% reduction of dandelion growth after three years of leaf mulching in their test plot.

Homeowners can use personal mowers to slowly go over fallen leaves to break them into small pieces. Mowing wet leaves isn't advisable, but possible if the leaves are raked thinly. Better still would be to give the leaves time to dry out. Mower deck height can be increased as well to aid in the process. Mulching blades do exist that can be traded out for the mowing blade, and this may well be something you can ask your mowing service about should you hire out this task. You'll have to likely mow leaves more that once a season, but your lawn will thank you for it.

Leaves are also an abundant source for a home compost pile. **Penn State Extension** calculated that a shade tree produces the equivalent of \$50 in compost that can be reintroduced into home gardens. Even more impressive is that a maple leaf contains more minerals than manure on a pound for pound comparison. There's no need to mulch the leaves in this situation, though smaller pieces do decompose faster. Once you've raked the leaves into the compost location, create a 6" layer of leaves. Cover this layers with 2" of "green" material (vegetable kitchen scraps, lawn clippings, manure) or other nitrogen rich material (dried blood, bone meal, or nutrient rich soil from another area in the yard). Every few weeks, a quick turn of the pile will help the ingredients break down and change into a garden superfood.



Even if you don't have a compost pile, you can pile the leaves in a corner of the yard and simply let them break down into leaf mold. **North Carolina Extension** has great instructions to help you get started. This makes for an excellent soil conditioner that will help to loosen heavy soils and also increase the water retention of that soil.

Fall is a great time to enjoy nature's beauty and she gets ready for a winter of rest. Once the leaves have shed their color, we can take advantage of the bounty that is right there on our lawn. Don't bag those leaves: use them to set your lawn and garden up for a healthy and beautiful growing season next year.

Gardening Deep Dive

Houseplants 101

Article and Photos by Annie Fairfax

Houseplants have become increasingly

popular as décor or something more, and it's easy to see why. With countless varieties available at plant shops, garden centers, home improvement stores, and plant swap meets, it's easier than ever to cultivate a veritable garden indoors for year-round enjoyment. If you're new to houseplants, here are some tips to get you started.

1. **Choose Lifestyle Compatible Plants**

Did you know that certain plants are toxic to pets and small children (Peace lily or Caladiums, for instance), whereas others contain caustic sap that can cause burns on anyone who touches them (Dumbcane). While this may not be problematic for those without children or pets, those who have either will want to do their due diligence and select the right plant for their lifestyle.

2. **Plan, Measure, and Prep**

Successful houseplant care is just like gardening; planting the right thing in the right place will ensure its survival. Plan where you'd like to place your houseplant, and measure the amount of sunlight it receives each day with a photometer. Then, prepare the right plant. Plants like succulents and cacti require long days of warm light away from drafty windows. Plants like pothos, monstera, and arrowheads are more tolerant.

3. **Supplement**

To cultivate a houseplant in less-than-ideal conditions, consider using grow lights, covering drafts with plastic, and increasing humidity by placing your new friend in a saucer of water.



4. **Propagation**

Since it's tempting to fill every nook and cranny of your home with houseplants, consider learning to propagate houseplants to proliferate your favorites. YouTube has tutorials for every houseplant, from African Violets to Zanzibar Gems.

5. **Watering & Fertilizer Frequency**

Each houseplant has unique needs, influenced by the unique conditions of your home. If your home is dry during the winter, water houseplants more often and consider using a humidifier to keep them happy. Learning the unique hydration needs of each houseplant will save you the heartache of watching it drown.

Pro-Tip: If you accidentally over-water your plant, dump out any excess water and pat the soil dry with a rag. Repeat as needed to prevent root rot and other decay issues.

If your houseplant requires fertilization, be sure to follow the instructions on the fertilizer package. Some must be applied outdoors, while others can simply be poked into the soil at the proper intervals.

6. Pest Management

Sometimes, houseplants are simply too appealing to pests like spider mites, mealy bugs, thrips, or spider mites. Select healthy, disease-free plants. At home, give your new plant friend a gentle wash with a mild dish soap to remove debris, microscopic pest eggs, and the top 2" of soil where some pests overwinter. Replace the removed soil with your favorite indoor-compatible soil and keep your new plant quarantined and under careful observation for the next few months.

Most pests emerge in spring. If you see small webs (spider mites), notice round, hard circles (scale), see white fluffy creatures (mealy bugs), or notice tiny, flying pests (fungus gnats), research the best way to remedy your specific houseplant. Nearly all pest issues can be remedied, especially if you catch them early. Keep in mind that houseplant pests are most active in spring and summer. None of the aforementioned pests are dangerous to people or pets.

Pro-Tip: To find reliable, scholarly sources, add ".edu" or ".gov" to your search!

Gardening for Health and Wellness

□ Cooking with the Fall Harvest: Simple Recipes Straight from Your Garden

Article and Photo by: Sophia Speroff

Autumn is a favorite time for gardeners and cooks alike. The summer rush of weeding and watering is behind us, and cooler weather lets plants develop deep flavors and richer colors. This is the season when your garden pays you back with baskets of roots, greens, and herbs ready to nourish your family. As both a Master Gardener and a Registered Dietitian, I've seen how eating seasonally improves nutrition, saves money, and deepens our connection to food. Fall is the perfect time to bring those benefits to your kitchen.



□ Star Ingredients of the Fall Garden

Fall gardens are brimming with ingredients that are beautiful and good for you:

- **Root Vegetables**—carrots, beets, turnips, and parsnips thrive in cool soil. Their natural sugars concentrate as temperatures drop, giving a sweet, earthy flavor along with fiber and immune-supporting vitamin A.
- **Winter Squash**—butternut, acorn, and delicata store well and are rich in fiber, potassium, and vitamin C.
- **Dark Leafy Greens**—kale, collards, and Swiss chard often taste even better after a light frost, delivering calcium, vitamin K, and antioxidants for bone and heart health.
- **Alliums**—onions, garlic, and leeks add depth to recipes and contain compounds that may support heart health and immunity.
- **Fresh Herbs**—parsley, thyme, rosemary, and sage can be harvested until the first hard frost, giving meals a burst of garden freshness even as days

shorten.

❑ **Quick Garden-to-Table Tips**

Harvest in the morning for peak flavor, use trimmings like carrot tops and kale stems to make vegetable stock, and dry or freeze extra herbs now to brighten winter dishes later.

❑ **Takeaway**

Cooking with your fall harvest celebrates the rhythm of nature, reduces grocery costs, and boosts nutrition. With simple techniques like roasting and sautéing, you can transform your garden's bounty into cozy, satisfying meals. This easy sausage-and-vegetable bake brings together protein, produce, and seasonal flavors for a nourishing dish you'll return to all autumn long for a hearty, healthy fall favorite!

❑ **Simple Harvest Vegetable and Sausage Recipe** *by Chelsea Lords*

Servings: 4 **Total Time:** 45 minutes

Ingredients

- 13 ounces smoked sausage (smoked turkey or chicken-apple sausage)
- 4 cups chopped sweet potatoes (2–4 sweet potatoes)
- 1 pound (3 cups) Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 3/4 tablespoon dried oregano
- 3/4 tablespoon dried thyme
- 3/4 teaspoon dried basil
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/2 teaspoon Lawry's seasoned salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 3 to 4 sprigs fresh rosemary
- 1/3 cup dried cranberries
- 1/3 cup dry roasted pecans, coarsely chopped
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese, optional

Instructions

Preheat oven to 400°F. Coin the sausage into 1/2-inch slices. Peel and chop sweet potatoes into 1/2-inch cubes. Trim ends off Brussels sprouts and slice in half (quarter extra-large ones).

Add sausage, sweet potato, and Brussels to the large sheet pan. Drizzle olive oil over everything. In a small bowl, combine oregano, thyme, basil, paprika, garlic powder, seasoned salt, and pepper. Sprinkle over the veggies and stir to coat. Spread out into an even layer (more room = better roasting).

Add rosemary sprigs on top and bake for 15 minutes. Remove, toss everything, and return to bake for another 10–20 minutes until veggies are crisp-tender.

Remove from oven, toss again, and add cranberries and pecans. Discard rosemary. If desired, top with Parmesan cheese. Enjoy immediately!

Nutrition (per serving): Calories 531 | Carbs 32g | Protein 25g | Fat 34g | Fiber 6.9g | Sugar 11g | Sodium 1,109mg | Iron 6mg



Smart Gardening is MSU Extension's campaign using earth-friendly messages to help gardeners make smart choices in their own backyards. The goal is to equip gardeners with a "tool kit" of research-based knowledge to use immediately at home. Whether choosing plants, using garden chemicals, fertilizer or applying water, gardeners need to understand the long-term impacts on their communities. For more Smart Gardening information click [here](#).



Ask Extension

Call the MSU Extension Lawn and Garden Hotline at 1-888-678-3464 (Monday, Wednesday and Friday 9am to noon)

Upcoming Events

Forest Forensics 2025

the art and science of using landscape features to learn more about the history of an area. Nearly every hill, pile of rocks, or clearing tells us a story of past events – if we pay attention!

Register for a free, guided history hike near you!

Houghton County: Saturday, October 18th, 10 AM- Noon

Dickinson County: Sunday, October 25th at 10 AM (Central)

Cheboygan County: Saturday, October 25th at 10 AM

Alger County: Thursday, October 30th at 4:30 PM

Alger County: Saturday, November 8th at 2-4 PM

Gladwin County: Wednesday, November 5th at 5 PM

Oakland County: Saturday, November 22nd 10 AM -Noon

**Register for a hike and the
Oct. 7th introductory webinar:
<https://tinyurl.com/4yap26z3>**



Presented in collaboration with MSU Extension, Keweenaw Land Trust, MTU Center for Science and Environmental Outreach, U.P. Land Conservancy, Pigeon River Country Discovery Center, and the Dickenson, Clare & Gladwin County Conservation Districts

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**Learn More & Register
Here!**



Foundations of GARDENING



Scholarship
application open
October 14-
November 11,
2025



Take the Foundations of Gardening course to learn the science behind a great garden, or to apply to become an MSU Extension Master Gardener

Winter class: February 12- April 16, 2026
Registration opens December 2, 2025



<https://www.canr.msu.edu/courses/foundations-of-gardening>

Visit our
Website

Do you love your community and want to start a school or community garden? Are you a beginning gardener looking for direction so that your school or community garden is as successful as it can be? If so, consider taking this free class! The "**Starting a School or Community Garden: Essential Steps for Success**" course offers a flexible, self-paced online learning experience. Offered by **Michigan State University Extension**, this course provides valuable guidance on launching and sustaining school or community garden projects.

Starting a School or Community Garden?



Learn the essential steps for success in this free online course!



News You Can Use



Can I harvest vegetables after frost?

Lindsey Kerr, Michigan State University Extension

- October 27, 2025
Updated from an original article written by Gretchen Voyle.

As fall sets in, many smart gardeners are busy wrapping up their vegetable and fruit harvests. By September, gardeners also begin watching for that first frost, which signals the end for warm-season vegetables. Some crops, such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplant, must be picked and used right away to preserve quality. Temperatures below 55 degrees Fahrenheit can damage tender crops



Why test soil in the fall?

Brent Crain, Michigan State University Extension

- October 09, 2025
Updated from an original article written by George Silva.

Soil testing is a best practice recommended by **Michigan State University Extension** to optimize agronomic, economic and environmental outcomes from fertilizer practices. MSU Extension recommends that soil be tested every two to four years. Nutrient levels vary by season. To accurately assess changes in soil nutrient levels, it is important to test soil at the same time of year. There are

and a light frost will often kill them, leading to rapid decay of any produce left on the plant.

[Read More](#)

several reasons why testing in fall might be preferable to testing in spring.

[Read More](#)

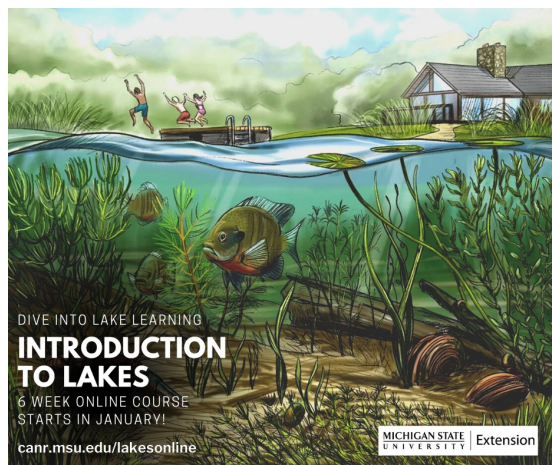


New free online course about insects in the garden

David Lowenstein, Michigan State University Extension - October 09, 2025

Michigan State University Extension is excited to announce a new learning opportunity about basic insect identification and a selection of fascinating insects found in the garden. These introductory level lessons are designed for anyone interested in learning more about six-legged organisms that live in a variety of habitats.

[Read More](#)



Enrollment now open: Popular MSU Extension course Introduction to Lakes Online offered January 2026

Paige Filice, Michigan State University Extension - September 03, 2025

As summer winds down, now is a great time for those who enjoy our lakes to learn more about them and how to keep them healthy. One popular learning opportunity is the **Introduction to Lakes Online course**

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