

## **Fall and Winter Gardening: Getting Ready for the Change!**

By Sallie Lee

It's that time of year when many of us are ready to put away shorts and tank tops in favor of long sleeves and blue jeans. In this area of Alabama, in addition to the return of football season, it's also time for yards and gardens to receive a little end of season attention. Work these activities into your pre-game warmup or post game cool down, so both your body and yard will benefit!

What goes with football? Or any other activity such as gardening or yard work in which muscles are utilized? Backs and shoulders in particular need protecting, muscles need to be warmed up and stretched out just as athletes do preparing for competition!

What activities are going to benefit our gardens and our bodies? Raking leaves for use in compost or as mulch not only means we get for free what nature has so generously provided us, but we burn approximately 150 calories an hour. Depending on how many leaves are raked, once the task is completed we have exercised, cleaned up our lawns, and added a carbon source to the compost pile. Soil amendment for flower beds and veggie gardens, right from our own back yard!

Why not plant cool-season annuals in colors of your favorite team? Either in-ground or in containers, plants such as mums (chrysanthemums), sage, aster, ornamental kale, pansies and verbena are available in a range of colors and growth habits. So remove the tired, sad plants to your compost pile and let them become ingredients in next spring's garden soil! Nature loves to recycle - we can do the same by putting leaves from the trees in our landscapes into our flower beds and gardens instead of purchasing the same material in bags from a retail store!

Want to make changes to your landscape by moving, removing, or adding plants? After the first kickoff of the season, start planning to plant! Many plant sales occur during September and October, perfect for those wanting to purchase and install trees, shrubs and bulbs that will flower next spring and for years to come. Cooler days make establishing root systems easier on plants, but keep in mind they'll still need water to survive. And while you're digging holes, "dig" that about 100 calories per 15 minutes are burned off, helping to keep those game day snacks from inflating our waistlines!

Got weeds? If you're a gardener of any sort, you know weeds are part of life in these parts! Hand weeding is worth about 240 calories burned an hour, is the most environmentally friendly form of weeding, and makes us appreciate the tenacity of unwelcome plants. Using a pre-emergent herbicide helps prevent cool season weeds from popping up, but it has to be applied early enough to suppress them, and we don't get to work off those cheese curls!

Weeding, composting, mulching, planting, transplanting – all timely activities to embrace between football games. However, fertilizing our lawns is not recommended for our area unless you want bigger, healthier weeds! As our warm-season turf grasses go dormant, we can mow one last time, compost the clippings, and winterize the lawnmower. But back off “feeding” your warm season turf grass at this point.

Pruning is also good exercise, so save the calories burned with that activity until after football season is over. While we’re trying to get back in shape after watching all those games, and get our landscapes in shape for the spring, work off about 170 calories an hour while pruning, starting in mid-to-late February if plants bloom in spring. For plants that bloom early, like forsythia (yellow bells) and some azaleas, prune them right after they stop flowering.

Stretch to check any materials, including pesticides, stored on shelves. Be sure they are in weather – and childproof - containers, preferably in locked cabinets or rooms. One of those situations where “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” chemicals used to treat lawn and garden pests need to be handled with the respect they deserve.

Enjoy the fall and winter seasons, whether burning calories working in your yard or consuming a few watching football games. Balance the watching and working, and both your body and your yard will be in better shape!

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