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# AUTUMN: THE BEST TIME TO PLANT

Laurie Meyerpeter, Placer County Master Gardener

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Fall is the best time to plant most garden plants and trees in mild winter climates. Most trees and shrubs have a significant increase in growth after the first year when compared with spring planted trees and shrubs. It is the optimum season to plant native plants or drought-tolerant plants. Many perennials have a head start when planted in the fall; cool weather annuals and vegetables have better yields and a longer season of production when planted in the fall rather than waiting until early spring.

## Benefits of Fall Planting

Fall planting gives plants a head start on growth. Autumn days are cooler and shorter so plants have less moisture loss through their leaves. The soil still retains warmth from the summer's heat, which encourages root growth. During this period of retained soil warmth, the plant sends out healthy new roots to support the future growth of leaves. Winter rains further soak the roots and encourage the growth of an extensive root system. When the days begin to warm the following spring, top growth begins, new leaves emerge, and root growth progresses at a rapid rate. During the following summer, the larger root system is able to supply more water and nutrients to the plant. The plant is better able to weather the harsh dry summer with less stress. By the following autumn, the plant will be significantly larger than one planted in the spring, in large part to the healthier root system that occurred by being planted in the fall.

Fall planted plants are also less susceptible to certain root rots. Frequent watering to keep plants alive the first year combined with warm summer temperatures can promote soil-borne fungus diseases. Spring planted plants have less extensive root systems and require more irrigation than those planted the previous fall. Many California natives are particularly vulnerable to these fungi and fall planting is especially important for these plants. Native plant societies often have plant sales in the autumn for this reason.

## Not Only Ornamentals

Cool season vegetables get a head start by planting in the fall. An early fall planting combined with a spell of warm autumn weather may produce a vegetable crop or flowers by late fall. If not, the plant will have a significant head start and will often begin producing food or flowers early in the spring when the soil is still too wet to dig.

Cool season crops produce in the cooler parts of the year and the harvest frequently ends when the days get the weather warms in long and early summer, so the earlier the plant begins producing, the longer the potential harvest can be. These vegetables include cabbages, broccoli, cauliflower, lettuces, spinach and other leafy greens, onions, carrots, radishes and other root crops, peas, and a variety of other crops. Nurseries are usually well stocked with cool season annuals in the fall.

## Think Ahead

The availability of some plants may be more limited in the fall, and of course plants that flower in spring or summer won't be in bloom. Gardeners may want to plan ahead and take notes of their favorite cultivars earlier in the year while they're still flowering, for planting in the fall.

Although some plants may have more limited availability, others are readily available, especially perennials that were started in late spring or summer. Also, it is an ideal time to choose trees and shrubs for fall color because the gardener can see the coloration on individual plants. Nurseries that stock native and drought tolerant plants are

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11477 E Avenue  
Auburn, CA 95603  
(530) 889-7385

E-Mail: [ceplacer@ucdavis.edu](mailto:ceplacer@ucdavis.edu)

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255 So Auburn  
Grass Valley, CA 95945  
(530) 273-4563

E-Mail: [cenevada@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cenevada@ucdavis.edu)

usually well stocked in fall. In addition, nurseries have abundant supplies of colorful flats of cool season annuals spilling from aisles.

### **Time to Plant!**

Fall planting includes a couple of other caveats.

At the nursery, plants may look scruffy or be root bound, especially spring blooming perennials and shrubs. However, even these plants get a head start by planting in the fall. If possible check the roots of nursery stock. If the plant is a little root bound, lightly score the roots on two sides of the plant and gently loosen the roots from their mass before planting. Trim scruffy leaves if they bother you.

When planting some plants, especially certain perennials that might be prone to rot in the winter, gardeners should amend unusually heavy soil with organic matter and position the crown at or slightly above the soil level when planting. This is good gardening wisdom for all plants, not just fall planted ones.

Another admonition is that many rural gardeners that use irrigation water to irrigate their plantings and purchase irrigation water only through the regular irrigation season rather than year round, may have to use another water source to irrigate until the rains come.

Finally, while fall planting has greater advantages, gardeners shouldn't shun spring planting. Spring is still a good planting season and is the preferred time of the year to plant frost-sensitive plants. It is also the recommended time for planting at high elevations. General advice is that plants should be in the ground at least six weeks before the ground freezes and that often precludes fall planting in many high altitude gardens in Placer and Nevada Counties.

### **Fall is the best time to plant.**

A huge advantage to fall planting is that it is such a great time of year for the gardener! The weather is usually grand. Shopping for plants is a pleasure with nurseries filled with flats of pansies, pots of gold and red chrysanthemums, and rows of trees clothed in scarlet, yellow, and crimson. The mornings are cool. The afternoons are warm. The sky is blue. The ground is not mucky- wet from a winter of rain. A gardener in this region can usually count on day after day of sunshine. The plants grow well. Autumn is a fine time for fair weather gardening!

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