



Season 1 Episode 3 – Preparing for the Fall Garden

August 14, 2023

Narrator

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds Team educating you about home landscapes, gardens and home pest.

Brian Brown

Thank you for joining us on from the ground up. My name is Brian Brown. And today we have Bethany O'Rear. She is a regional extension agent covering central Alabama. And she's with us today. And she's going to talk a little about getting ready for fall gardening. So welcome to the podcast.

Bethany O'Rear

Thanks, Brian. Happy to be here.

Brian Brown

What are some things that gardeners and landscapers and, you know, anybody who wants to take care of their garden? Are some things they can do to get ready for the Fall Gardens.

Bethany O'Rear

So if we're talking about vegetable gardening, now is a great time. As our summer garden is winding down. You want to use that opportunity, especially if you're not planting a fall garden. You want to use this opportunity to really clean up. Right? So you want to get any disease plant out. You don't want to leave any plant residue on the soil surface.

Bethany O'Rear

Get those plant supports out. So if you use stakes or, you know, cattle panels or whatever you're using in your garden to support those vining plants, you want to get those out and then really clean that area. But we don't want to leave bare soil, right? So we either want to mulch that area and let the mulch break down over the winter with the rain and the, you know, the colder temperatures.

Bethany O'Rear

It'll help break that organic matter down and then you can incorporate that at early next spring or you can also show a cover crop. So there's a lot of cover crops, several varieties available for the garden. Crimson Clover is one that we think about. Canola is one that we think about, maybe vetch. So do a little research into those to see what works best for your garden.

Bethany O'Rear

But we definitely don't want to leave that soil bare, so we do need to mulch it or put in a cover crop.

Brian Brown

So what about herbicides? Can you use a herbicide or is it a good idea to use a herbicide before you do all that? Like, you know, just spray roundup or just whatever it may be?

Bethany O'Rear

Right. So if you've got undesirable vegetation, so you've gotten rid of all of your summer crops and you've got some weeds and that kind of thing, yeah, you definitely want to get those out of there. So you may look at spraying a nonselective herbicide a couple of weeks before you're ready to put in your cover crop. So in that way, you know, you give it two weeks, just make sure that you've got a good kill, then you can till that area.

Bethany O'Rear

And then sow your cover crop seed.

Brian Brown

That was going to be one of my other questions after you do that, you know, do you wait a period of time before you start tilling it in?

Bethany O'Rear

Right. Yeah. You just want to make sure that you give the herbicide an opportunity to do what it needs to do. So sometimes, depending on the stage of weed development, it may take a little bit longer. So really we'd say kind of about two weeks and you'll know that you've got a good kill on that undesirable vegetation and then we will then you can sow that cover crop, seed.

Brian Brown

So one of the other things you can do is solarization. And in my experience, there's not a lot of people who understand or even know or even heard of solarization before. So a lot of great benefits to that. So if you want to talk about that?

Bethany O'Rear

Sure! so, you know, in August and September, we're really kind of done with gardening. We're worn out, our plants are worn out. We're worn out because of the heat of the Alabama summers. The one thing you can do this time of year in August and September is really make that heat work for you. So especially if you have issues with perennial weeds or you've got issues - annual weeds, nematodes.

Bethany O'Rear

Right. So this is a good way to kind of address that. And so really what you want to look at is solarizing your garden soil. Now, depending on how large your plot is and you can even do this and raised beds as well, you're going to look at getting that area completely clean of vegetation. So we don't want any vegetation on that area.

Bethany O'Rear

Then we're going to moisten. You kind of want to break that up till that area moisten it really well, you don't want it soupy, but it has to be moist. And then you're going to use a clear plastic. And we usually say about six mils is the thickness that you need to use. And so you apply that clear plastic.

Bethany O'Rear

Now, some folks say, well, why can I use black? That would you know, that makes it hotter - not really. So when we're looking at clear, you kind of has a greenhouse effect, right. For the sun's rays go in through that clear plastic and then they can't get back out. You got to secure that plastic on all sides. So you either take some loose soil pile it around the edges, but you've got to create that barrier so that your the temperatures can build up in that area.

Bethany O'Rear

If they're if you don't secure the sides. And there's any way for that hot air to come out, then you're defeating your purpose. Right. So and then you're going to want to leave it on there. About six weeks but really 8 to 12 weeks is preferable. So obviously, this would be an area that you're not planting on, are usually planning on planting a fall garden.

Bethany O'Rear

Right. Because you're going to miss that window. But if you have a problem area, this is a really good way to address that and hopefully remedy those issues before spring comes around next year.

Brian Brown

Yeah, I think a lot of people don't do solarization either. A, they don't know what it is or how to do it, but they also you kind of have to sacrifice your fall garden if you want to do that. That's one of the detriments of it. You do have to sacrifice that. But like you said, if you have a problem in your garden, it's a great way to, you know, kill off those weeds because it gets really, really hot under that.

Brian Brown

Do you know what kind of temperatures we're talking?

Bethany O'Rear

I want to say that it needs to be like 120, but I'm not positive. I would have to double check that. But you want to make sure those temperatures really get up. Basically, you look at it like this. You've got the moisture, you're got the heat, so you're kind of steam cleaning that soil, for lack of a better word.

Bethany O'Rear

So you've got to create that environment so the heat can really do what it needs to do.

Brian Brown

Like we said, there's a lot of benefits to solarization too, especially nematodes. That's one of the better ways to get rid of nematodes if you have that problem, right?

Bethany O'Rear

Yeah, it really helps. And there's not a lot of other options when it comes to dealing with nematodes. So there's something that it's fairly easy. It's a little labor intensive at the beginning, but then after that, all you have to do is just sit back and wait.

Brian Brown

So we've talked about fall crops in fall gardening. So what do we do on our landscape? Is there anything we can do to help prepare for the landscape in the fall?

Bethany O'Rear

Sure. So we always promote planting in the fall. Whenever temperatures get, you know, temperatures go down, we get more regular rainfall, but it's really beneficial to plan before you plant, right? So you can utilize late summer, early fall for doing some research. What are you hoping to accomplish in your landscape? Maybe you've got an area that you want to install some new things or, you know, maybe you've seen some plants in the garden center or, you know, in online or in, you know, on a home and garden show, whatever that you want to look at to see, Hey, maybe would that work in my landscape?

Bethany O'Rear

So now's a great time to do that planning. So, you know, research plant material, if it's not available, all now's a good time to contact your local independent garden center. Hey, do you guys carry this? If not, you know, could you order it for me? There's a really good chance lots of independent garden centers or are willing to check with their suppliers.

Bethany O'Rear

And it's as simple as, Hey, we want to try some of these. Can you add this to our next load? So unfortunately, demand usually pushes an increased supply in our garden centers in the spring, and that's good too. But your ideal time for planting is, you know, November, December once again, because of the cooler temperatures,

because we're getting supplemental rainfall and it gives the opportunity for those new plants to really establish their roots and their new home before they try to put on their suit in the spring.

Bethany O'Rear

Now, granted, you can still plan in the spring, honestly, you can plant pretty much year round, but just know if you're planting spring and into summer, they're going to require a lot more maintenance. They're putting them in a stressful situation. They're trying to grow roots, they're trying to grow shoots. It's hot. A lot of times it's dry. Pest pressure has increased, so there's a lot more involved as far as the maintenance of plants goes whenever we plant those in the spring and into the summer.

Bethany O'Rear

So we really encourage folks, you know, plant in the fall. But before you do that, once again, getting ready for that, your local garden center may not have the plants you want when you go out there in October and November. So now's the time to ask them and start getting that plan in place.

Brian Brown

So, Bethany, what are some other things that you can do generally in your fall garden or in your landscape?

Bethany O'Rear

So I wouldn't be a good extension agent if I didn't mention soil testing. Right? So but it's so important not only for vegetable gardening, but also in our landscape. So if looking at the vegetable gardening side of it, you know, let's say this is your first time to garden this area, or maybe your plants aren't doing as well as they should, and you want to do a soil test when you get those soil test results back.

Bethany O'Rear

Let's say your pH is too low and you need to add lime. Well, the fall is a great time to do that. And one of the reasons we say that is because lime is pretty slow acting. It takes some time to move through that soil profile

and really raise the pH to that acceptable level. So a lot of times we say fall, especially once again, not planning a fall garden.

Bethany O'Rear

Fall is the best time to do that because it as the ground freezes and thaws, as the rains come, it allows that lamb to move through that soil profile, giving it time for you to be ready for spring planting. If we're looking on the ornamental side of things, let's say you're wanting to install some new azaleas or camellias, or maybe you're looking at incorporating some blueberries as part of an edible landscape area.

Bethany O'Rear

Those plants require a lower pH so when you look at planting, you want to make sure that area that you have those planned for is going to be suitable for them to grow and flourish. Well, you're not going to know that unless you do a soil test. So we really encourage soil testing this time of year and, you know, adjust and that once again gives you time to adjust that pH if you need to raise it or if you need to lower it.

Bethany O'Rear

Sometimes that is the case is with our ornamentals that I mentioned to get a little while ago are acid loving ornamental azaleas, camellias blueberries. So now's a good time to do that so you can apply those amendments, apply those things that are going to raise or lower your soil based on those soil test results.

Brian Brown

Yeah, and there's a lot of resources on our website, on the extension website, ACES.EDU, just search for soil testing. And if you've never taken one before, it's very easy. There's instructions, there's videos on the website and, you know, just go and check it out. You know, go to your local extension office, you're county extension office and pick up a soil testing box or a soil testing bag and send it off.

Brian Brown

And, you know, you usually if you get an email result, you can usually have your results pretty quickly. So that's always encouraged. You know, when you get your test results, there's usually comments at the bottom that tells you exactly what to do. So, you know, make sure to read those comments carefully. A lot of things may not make sense for you on the page, but, you know, if you have any trouble, you're always welcome to call your local extension agent.

Bethany O'Rear

Right? Yeah. So because we can actually pull those reports up for wherever we are and we're always happy to help the client understand what those recommendations are.

Brian Brown

Well, Bethany, thank you for joining us today. Hope everybody has learned a little bit about what you can do this fall to help get your garden and your landscaping in order and make sure you go to your local garden center and start picking out some plants. So thank you for joining us, Bethany.

Bethany O'Rear

Thank you for having me.

Brian Brown

And we hope we will see you next time!

From the Ground Up is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.