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# Horticulture Hints

for Louisiana

Fall 2026

Spent plants and decaying fruit should be removed at the end of the summer growing season to improve garden hygiene and reduce potential pest and disease problems before fall crops are planted. Adobe stock photo

## Preparing Your Summer Garden for Fall Success

As summer vegetables begin to fade, now is the perfect time to prepare your garden for a productive fall season. A little cleanup and planning can reduce pest and disease problems while creating an ideal environment for cool-season crops.

Start by removing spent or declining vegetable plants. Tomato, cucumber, squash and bean plants that are no longer producing beans should be pulled up and disposed of, especially if they show signs of disease. Leaving old plants in the garden can provide shelter for insects and allow diseases to persist into the next growing season.

Good garden hygiene is one of the most important steps in the transition process. Be sure to pick up and remove discarded vegetables, fallen fruit and plant debris from the soil surface. Rotting produce can attract pests such as rodents, insects and disease-causing organisms. Weeds should also be removed before they have a chance to produce seed.

Once beds are cleared, consider adding compost or other organic matter to replenish nutrients depleted during the summer growing season. Lightly incorporate the material into the soil and ensure irrigation systems are functioning properly before planting.

Fall is an excellent time to grow crops such as lettuce, spinach, broccoli, cabbage, carrots and radishes. In Louisiana and across the Gulf South, many fall vegetables can be planted from late summer through early fall for harvest during cooler weather.

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## Keep Weeds from Producing Seeds: Your Future Self Will Thank You

As we enter the late summer and early fall, there are a few critical things to remember regarding weed control in your yard and garden. Many summer annual weeds are beginning to produce seeds at this time of year. Now is a great time to think about the impacts of the soil seedbank on overall weed management programs.

**Pulling a few weeds, such as this chamberbitter, can prevent larger weed problems in the future. Photo by Colton D. Blankenship**

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By cleaning up garden debris, improving soil health and preparing beds early, gardeners can enjoy healthier plants, fewer pest problems, and a successful fall harvest. A little effort now will pay off with a productive and attractive garden throughout the fall season.

*Christine Coker, Ph.D.*

*State Vegetable Specialist, Research Coordinator, Hammond Research Station*

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Most of the weeds that people battle in their yards and gardens germinate and come from the soil seedbank, which is the sum of all the viable weed seeds present in the soil at a given site. People don't often think of the weed population as being made up of both growing weeds and dormant seeds in the soil, but this is a key component of weed management. Effective weed management starts with keeping seeds out of the seedbank in the first place, whether by preventing existing weeds from reproducing or by limiting the import of new weed seeds from offsite through things such as contaminated mulches or media. If there aren't many seeds, there won't be many weeds. Conversely, if there are lots of seeds, there will be lots of weeds.

When growing a garden, it is easy to overlook weeds growing on the perimeter and margins. Often, time and effort are invested in keeping weeds away from the crop itself while weeds on the edges of the garden plot are allowed to grow. Keeping weeds away from the crop is extremely important to protect yield; however, it is also critical to control weeds on the margins of the yard and garden as well.

A single weed can produce many thousands of seeds depending on species and conditions if allowed to grow unhindered. Overlooked weeds on the perimeters of gardens and landscapes can contribute millions of seeds into the soil seedbank, which makes managing weeds in subsequent years even more challenging. Pulling a few weeds this year can save the need to pull thousands of weeds in future years.

It is important to remove weeds before they are allowed to produce seeds. If weeds have already started to produce seeds, it is beneficial to put a bag or covering over the weeds before pulling them to limit the dispersal of seeds over the area. If weeds have produced seeds, avoid removal via string-trimming or mowing as those practices will disperse seeds over a wide area.

For perennial weeds such as nutsedge species, consider applying herbicides after the garden crop is finished but before mowing or tilling the garden area. Ensure that selected herbicides are labeled for the intended use and do not have carryover concerns for planting future garden crops or ornamentals. If perennial weeds are not managed, infestations are likely to worsen over time.

Late summer and early fall are critical times for keeping seeds out of the seedbank. Time and effort invested in managing weeds now will pay dividends in the future via reduced weed pressure and lower overall efforts needed to keep yards and gardens free of weeds.

*Colton D. Blankenship, Ph.D.*

*Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Hammond Research Station*

# Scoring Points for Every Yard: Fall Garden Tips for Football Season

**Straight to the point:** As the fall season kicks off, it is time to get the team ready to garden. The milder temperatures of fall are a great time to install perennial plants, add cool-season color and consider construction features to create the ultimate gameday experience. Score points with friends and family by following this playbook to make every yard count.

Many of us suffer through summer with one thing on our mind: "Get me to fall." Football season, cooler temperatures and hope springing eternal for a successful year on the field. With kickoff just around the corner, there remains a lot of work to do in the landscape, but also an opportunity to sit back and enjoy the view — whether that is in your yard or in Tiger Stadium.

The start of football season welcomes the next generation of athletes — new faces being put into new places. The garden is not so different. Certainly, some of the plants (or players) you are installing have been developed locally. These are homegrown natives that you have had the privilege of paying attention to since they were seedlings (or seniors in high school). Some plants may come from far away, recruited from far-reaching areas of the country (or world, even), perhaps transferring in after growing in someone else's yard for several seasons. Whether coming from near or far, fall is a great time to put new players and plants in the field. Temperatures are not as extreme during the fall as they are during the sustained summertime swelter, so additions can acclimate better to the new environment.

While paying players for their name, image and likeness — or NIL — is a new consideration in college football, horticulturists know all about the importance of this acronym, and managing NIL must be considered regardless of your plant or roster composition.

Plant **names** catch our attention, with examples such as Linebacker *Distylium* casting an imposing presence in the landscape and serving as an excellent choice as an evergreen hedge.

**Image** is important, and keeping a clean-cut appearance may be the goal of some coaches; however, certain plants should be unleashed in fall. In other words, do not try to control them (i.e., do not prune them). Azaleas should not be cut back in fall, as this removes the coveted springtime blooms. Ornamental grasses should not be cut back either, as the foliage serves as protection for wildlife throughout winter.

As far as **likeness**, make sure you know what plant you are working with. For example, *Hydrangea macrophylla* and *Hydrangea paniculata* have similar flowers, but require different maintenance considerations (*H. macrophylla* prefers afternoon

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shade and pruning after flowers fade, but *H. paniculata* prefers full sun and can be pruned in late winter, since flowers form on new growth).

Make sure you put the right plant (and maintenance practices) in the right situation to succeed. Native plants are a great option for inhospitable conditions in Louisiana. For example, let's say you have a low, poorly drained area of the landscape where many species suffer (a "Death Valley," if you will). Putting plants like Louisiana iris, bald cypress or buttonbush in these challenging conditions turns the intimidating site into a home-field advantage, since those species thrive in that environment.


**Top left: Get your Tiger garden ready for gameday. Top righ: Violas add purple and gold to the cool-season landscape. Bottom: Lemon Ball sedum can be used for aesthetics and school spirit. Photos by Damon Abdi**

Cool-season color is a great way to add a jolt of interest to the landscape, including Louisiana Super Plants such as Jolt dianthus adds purple to the playbook. Petunias and violas provide another avenue for purple, which certainly plays well with gold-colored plants this time of year. The vivid yellows of snapdragons are a quintessential cool-season bedding plant, adding height to annual beds; whereas Lemon Ball sedum provides a tender perennial to add a golden texture to the landscape. Whether in-ground or in-container, purple and gold are always a great way to show school spirit during the season.

Finally, views are all important whether you are watching the game live or in your backyard landscape. Installing comfortable conditions for fellow football fans may include a patio for gathering, a pergola for shade or an outdoor kitchen for tailgating at home. Install these features now so they are ready for football season. If you want to block off rival fans (or neighbors), consider suitable hedge species, such as the previously mentioned Linebacker *Distylium*. Since football season goes well into winter, perhaps you want something like a holly as your evergreen hedge. Hollies, of course, conjure a vision of red berries during the holiday season. Due to the dioecious nature of hollies, separate male and female plants are often both required to facilitate fruit. If you can only pick one specimen, take some advice from Keith Jackson by exclaiming "Whoa, Nellie," and selecting the Nellie R. Stevens holly, as this can produce (parthenocarpic) fruit without fertilization from a male plant.

As you prepare for the best time of year, go to your local independent garden center for plants, and Geaux Tigers!

*Damon Edward Abdi, Ph.D.*

*Assistant Professor, Extension Specialist, Hammond Research Station*

# Fall Lawn Care Tips for Louisiana: Separating Good Advice from Generic Advice

If you search the internet for fall lawn care tips, you'll quickly find lists recommending practices such as aeration, dethatching, fertilizing, seeding and adjusting mowing height. While those recommendations may be appropriate for cool-season lawns in northern states, they do not always translate well to warm-season turfgrasses grown in south Louisiana. Common lawn grasses in our region — St. Augustinegrass, centipedegrass, bermudagrass and zoysia — are preparing for winter during the fall, not entering a period of vigorous growth.

Before following generic lawn care advice, it is important to understand how each practice fits into the seasonal growth cycle of warm-season grasses.

## Aerating

Aeration, or aerifying, involves removing small cores of soil from the lawn to relieve compaction and improve air and water movement into the root zone. While aeration is a beneficial practice, fall is generally not the best time to perform it on warm-season turf.

As temperatures cool and days shorten, warm-season grasses begin slowing their growth and storing energy for winter survival. Aeration creates injury to the turf that requires active growth for recovery. For this reason, core aeration is typically best performed in late spring or early summer when the grass is actively growing and can quickly repair itself.

**Fall takeaway:** Skip major aeration projects in the fall and plan them for next growing season.

## Thatch Removal

Thatch is a layer of living and dead stems, roots and shoots that accumulates between the soil surface and the green turf canopy. Excessive thatch can interfere with water infiltration, nutrient movement

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and root development. However, a small amount of thatch is not necessarily a problem and can help moderate soil moisture and temperature fluctuations.

Removing thatch through verticutting, scarifying or vertical mowing can be highly disruptive to the lawn. Like aeration, these practices are best performed during periods of active growth so the turf can recover quickly. Conducting aggressive thatch removal in the fall may leave the lawn weakened heading into winter.

**Fall takeaway:** Evaluate thatch levels now but save aggressive removal practices for late spring or summer.

## Fertilizing

Fall fertilization can be one of the most misunderstood lawn care topics in Louisiana. Many winterizer fertilizers promoted nationally contain nitrogen and potassium. While potassium may benefit lawns with a documented deficiency, more potassium is not always better.

The best way to determine whether potassium is needed is through a soil test. Applying potassium to soils that already contain sufficient levels is unlikely to provide meaningful benefits.

Nitrogen deserves even more consideration. In general, nitrogen applications to warm-season lawns should be limited as the growing season winds down. Excess nitrogen late in the year can stimulate tender growth when the lawn should be preparing for dormancy.

If your goal is maintaining color during the fall months, foliar iron applications can often provide greening without encouraging excessive growth.

**Fall takeaway:** Soil test before applying potassium and avoid heavy nitrogen applications late in the season.

## Seeding

Fall seeding is commonly recommended for cool-season grasses because cooler temperatures favor their establishment. Warm-season turfgrasses operate differently.

The cooler temperatures and shorter days of fall slow germination, establishment and growth of warm-season species. Newly established seedlings may not have enough time to develop before winter arrives. While fall seeding is not impossible, the odds of success decline significantly as temperatures cool.

Fall takeaway: Wait until late spring for most warm-season turf seeding projects.

**Annual bluegrass, a prolific seed producer and troublesome winter weed, is best prevented with fall preemergence herbicide applications. Photo by Eric DeBoer**

## Mowing

A common recommendation found online is to lower mowing heights in the fall. This advice is often intended for cool-season lawns and does not necessarily apply to warm-season grasses in Louisiana.

For warm-season turf, continue mowing at the recommended height for your species throughout the fall. Avoid removing excessive leaf tissue in an attempt to winterize the lawn. Maintaining proper mowing height helps preserve turf health and supports continued photosynthesis as long as the grass remains active.

As growth slows, mowing frequency can gradually be reduced, but the target mowing height should remain the same.

**Fall takeaway:** Keep mowing at the recommended height and simply mow less often as growth slows.

## Leaf Management

One fall lawn care task that is often overlooked in Louisiana is leaf management. Leaves that accumulate on the lawn can block sunlight, trap moisture, and create favorable conditions for disease development.

Rather than allowing leaves to build up, remove them regularly with a mower, rake, or blower. In many cases, dry leaves can be mulched into the lawn in small amounts without causing problems.

**Fall takeaway:** Keep excessive leaf accumulations off the lawn throughout the fall and winter.

## Weed Prevention

Fall is an excellent time to think about winter weed control. Many troublesome weeds such as annual bluegrass (*Poa annua* L.), lawn burweed (*Soliva sessilis* Ruiz and Pavon), henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule* L.) and chickweed (*Stellaria media* [L.] Vill.) germinate as temperatures cool.

Preemergence herbicides applied in early fall can help prevent many winter annual weeds from becoming established. Be sure to select products labeled for your turfgrass species and follow all label directions.

**Fall takeaway:** Fall is often the most important time of year for preventing winter weeds.

## The Bottom Line

Not all fall lawn care advice is created equal. Many recommendations found online are written for cool-season lawns growing hundreds of miles from Louisiana. For warm-season grasses, fall should be viewed as a time to prepare the lawn for winter rather than aggressively renovate it. Focus on proper mowing, leaf management, soil testing and winter weed prevention, while saving disruptive practices such as aeration, dethatching and major seeding projects for the growing season.

*Eric DeBoer, Ph.D.*

*Assistant Professor*

# What to Plant
## in the Vegetable Garden in the Fall

This 2026 fall edition of Horticulture Hints is full of great vegetable gardening information. Planting vegetables is popular among many of our Louisiana county agents and Louisiana gardeners for many reasons:

- Homegrown always tastes fresh and delicious, unless those pesky worms eat your plants before harvest. (Read Mark Wilson's article in this issue.)
- Growing your own food and placing it on your table as part of the meal brings a true sense of accomplishment. In the busy world we live in it is nice to stop and see the literal fruits — or should I say veggies — of your labor.
- Gardening is a great form of exercise providing you with time in the fresh outdoor air, increasing endorphins and a sense of happiness.

So, while you are outside taking care of the garden, here are some ideas of vegetables you can start seed of in August and then transplant or direct seed in September and October.

### August

**Start seeds to transplant later:** broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, Chinese cabbage, cabbage, cucumbers and squash. Plant these outside. A greenhouse or hot house is too hot this time of year. All the listed vegetable crops will take approximately five to six weeks from the day you seed them to becoming a transplant ready to be set in the garden in September or October with the exceptions of the cucumbers and squash. Those two vegetables only need two weeks from the day of seeding to transplanting them into the garden.

**Direct seed late in the month:** bush and snap beans, beets, shallot sets and Irish potatoes. You can also direct seed mustard greens. The mustard green variety that I prefer to grow in August is Tendergreen because it has less of a tendency to bolt in the heat.

### September

**Start seeds to transplant later or move transplants into the garden mid-September:** broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, cauliflower, collards, lettuce, kohlrabi, kale and Swiss chard.

**Direct seed:** beets, endive, carrots, English peas, snow peas, mustard, parsley, snap beans, radishes, rutabaga, spinach and turnips. Onion seeds can be planted from the middle to late September which will be later transplanted as "sets" in the garden once they have two to three thin leaves, typically in December.

**Bulbs:** Garlic bulbs are planted mid to late September. Do not wait until late in the month. These need a full nine months of growth to form new bulbs that are divided. If you wait too late to plant, our naturally rainy springs will turn your bulbs to mush before they have a chance to divide into individual toes. Shallot sets can be planted all month long.

### October

**Transplant into the garden:** broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, cauliflower, kale, lettuce, Swiss chard and greens, including turnip, mustard or collard (although I always just direct seed these because it is cheaper).

**Direct seed: beets, carrots, celery, endive, kale, leaf lettuce, mustard coll**ard or turnip greens, radish, parsley, spinach and greens, including turnip, mustard or collard. If you did not plant onion seeds last month, you can now. They will form small sets that can be planted typically in December.

Hoping you grow an amazing fall vegetable garden!

*Kathryn Fontenot, Ph.D.*

*LSU AgCenter Southwest Region Director*

**A beautiful fall garden growing at the Sugar Research Station in St. Gabriel, Louisiana. Photo by Kathryn "Kiki" Fontenot**

# Unlocking **Water Quality** Parameters for Gardens

Water quality plays a critical role in healthy landscapes, yards and gardens, especially during high temperatures, which can lead to plant stress and vulnerability. In peak summer and fall heat, the way in which water is applied to gardens and landscapes can drastically impact chemical interactions with plants. For instance, soil compaction can reduce the holding capacity of water applied directly to the surface of the media, which doesn't allow for vital minerals and nutrients to reach the soil. Sufficient volumes of water should be able to leach through the plant media, especially in potted plants, to reduce the accumulation of soluble salts that may be in your water source.

## Types of Water

It is important to understand the factors that can impact your plants, including the type of water, which influences parameters such as salinity, pH and alkalinity. Each water quality parameter can have different effects on foliage and flowering plants. Many different types of water can be used, including:

**Tap water:** The majority of city municipal water comes from either well or surface water sources. This water can vary depending on the region, with mineral accumulation being the most important parameter. The Southern Hills Aquifer System in Baton Rouge is known for its "soft" water, which provides high water quality. Other areas may have more "hard" water, which refers to slightly elevated calcium or magnesium that can cause excess accumulation in soil.

**Rainwater:** This is the most desirable water for plants due to very few natural impurities or contaminants. This naturally occurring water can impact some outdoor landscapes and gardens with minimal effort, but in areas of limited rain, it can also be collected for use. Though rainwater harvesting can be tedious, there are simple designs and user-friendly guides to installing systems at residential or commercial spaces for collected rainwater runoff.

**Reverse osmosis water:** This water is produced by a membrane filtration process where salts and contaminants are removed, but trace minerals are able to pass through. These systems are a cheaper alternative to water filtration and provide valuable water for plant watering.

**Distilled water:** This is the result of water that is vaporized into steam and then cooled before collection. The condensation process results in reduced salts and contaminants. This water is typically more expensive and is usually not recommended for plants because of the lack of micronutrients.

## Water Test Parameters

To fully understand what elements are impacting the water quality of your current irrigation method, a complete water analysis by an accredited laboratory is recommended. Many university labs, including LSU Soil Testing and Plant Analysis Lab or LSU AgChemistry, provide comprehensive water analysis packages to show parameters that can impact plants and landscapes. This analysis should be done to establish a working baseline and can be done as frequently as needed. After the first analysis, it is a good idea to keep simple water quality test kits on hand for more periodic sampling. This can be done at home on a regular basis to keep a record of water quality fluctuations. Homeowners can monitor irrigation water and log data in a notebook to help detect changes over time in plant health. Four water test parameters are recommended: pH, alkalinity, hardness and electrical conductivity.

**pH:** The pH of water is a measure of how acidic or basic it is on a scale from 0-14 in pH units. A pH of 7.0 is considered neutral and indicates pure water, while solutions less than 7.0 are acidic and greater than 7.0 are basic. In most media and soil-based systems, pH is an important driver for plant growth because of the impact on the availability of fertilizer and nutrients. Testing water for pH is very easy, with tools being readily available online or at your local pet, hardware or pool supply store. The simplest, most inexpensive tool is a test strip that can be dipped in a water sample and compared to a color chart to determine the pH. These strips can have a broad pH range (0-14) or a more precise range (5.5-9.0), so be sure you are getting the ones appropriate for your water. Additionally, there are pH probes or data loggers that can be used as a handheld device. These are typically more expensive and require calibration for accurate measurements. The ideal pH of water for greenhouse and nursery production is around 5.4-7.0, while specific landscape and garden plants may tolerate different ranges. It's best to check the targeted pH for specific plants you are growing. Acidic or basic adjustment solutions or fertilizers can always be used to alter the pH to more ideal conditions for your plants.

**Alkalinity:** The measure of water's ability to neutralize acids or the capacity to change or resist a change in pH of the growing media is alkalinity. This establishes that a buffering capacity is valuable for plant roots to resist sudden changes due to the pH of fertilizer or media. If alkalinity is too high or low in water, it can impact nutrient availability by reducing pH impact. This is normally due to carbonates, bicarbonates and hydroxides in water. Similar to pH, there are at-home test strips that can be used to measure a range of alkalinity. More accurate and scientific methods for this test include titrations with compounds or digital handheld units, which can be more expensive and time-consuming. Often, high alkalinity water has a higher pH and may require adjustment. The recommended upper limit for alkalinity for both greenhouse and nursery production is 100 mg/L (100 ppm), while other garden and landscape plants should be checked for more specific ranges.

**Hardness:** In water, the dissolved calcium and magnesium drive the hardness of tap and irrigation water. Lower concentrations of these in water make it soft, while elevated concentrations are referred to as hard. Though not always the case, hard water can correlate to higher alkalinity due to the presence of calcium carbonate. If either calcium or magnesium is too high, it can block the plant's ability to take up the other critical micronutrients. If residual buildup can be seen on soil media, it may be due to accumulation of these compounds, which also can be present in residue on plant leaves and clogged irrigation equipment. These parameters can also be measured with at-home test strips that are

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**Sprinkler spray head for nursery production systems. Photo by M.P. Hayes**

inexpensive and color-indicated. Higher-caliber alternatives like digital handhelds can be purchased for more accurate measurements. Hardness in water for greenhouse and nursery use should not exceed 150 mg/L ($CaCO_3$).

**Electrical conductivity (EC):** This is the measurement of the concentration of dissolved ions, such as salts, acids or bases, that conduct electrical current in a solution. Testing for this can provide an estimate of the number of ions in irrigation water and, in many cases, is linked to dominant sources like fertilizer. This measurement is reported in millimhos per centimeter (mmhos/cm), millisiemens per centimeter (mS/cm) or decisiemens per meter (dS/M), which are all equivalent units. Other similar parameters (though slightly different) are total dissolved solids (TDS) and salinity. TDS includes all the following minerals, salts, metals, cations, or anions dissolved in water, not just dissolved ions like EC. TDS is also reported in parts per million (ppm). Salinity is the measure of all salts in water, which includes chloride, sodium, sulfate, magnesium, calcium and potassium, and is reported in parts per thousand (ppt). Electrical conductivity is the most practical way to measure salinity or TDS of water, and the preferred method and scale for landscape, nursery and garden settings.

This is because higher dissolved ions can affect plant cell membranes by increasing salts and other minerals in the media or soil. This can drastically reduce growth and lead to stress or decrease plant quality over time if not flushed with low-dissolved-ion water, like rainwater. The best method for measuring EC is with a digital handheld meter that is easily calibrated with a two-point solution: pure water and a saltwater solution. Most meters purchased online or in the store will come with a solution for calibration and detailed instructions. Overall, EC greater than 1.0 mmhos/cm may indicate a high salinity and potential hazard for some plants.

The LSU AgCenter has additional information in the form of factsheets for horticulture tips and water quality impacts for various environmental systems. For more information on the water quality specifically, check out the LSU Water Quality Extension Lab homepage at https://faculty.lsu.edu/hayes/index.php or email mhayes@agcenter.lsu.edu.

*M.P. Hayes, Ph.D.*

*Assistant Professor of Agricultural and Industrial Water Quality*

# Pumpkin Care Tips for a Successful Harvest

If you planted pumpkins in June or July in time for a Halloween harvest, they should be setting small to medium-sized fruit now. Here are some tips and techniques to apply as you monitor the progress of your pumpkin crop:

**An immature pale green pumpkin that will mature to a pale blue.
Photo by Marcie Wilson**

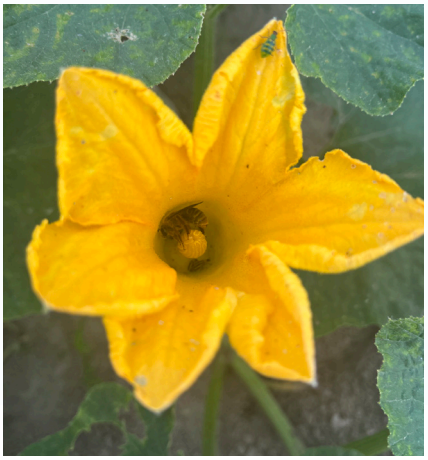
**An immature dark green pumpkin that will mature to a bright orange.
Photo by Marcie Wilson**

**An immature green pumpkin turning its mature orange color.
Photo by Marcie Wilson**

- Monitor for pests and diseases such as squash vine borer, cucumber beetles, powdery mildew and downy mildew.
- Control broadleaf weeds and grasses as these harbor insect pests and choke out vines.
- Make insecticide applications in the early evening hours when pollinators are less active.
- Pollination from insects is crucial for fruit formation as bees visit both the male and female flowers during peak midday hours. Avoid stepping on or damaging the female flowers found at the further ends of the runners. The male flowers will bloom first and will outnumber the female flowers. Try hand pollination to ensure some fruit set on each plant. See the pictures below to identify male and female flowers on pumpkins and squash.
- New pumpkins will be yellow or green and turn to their intended color as they mature.
- Irrigate thoroughly and evenly using drip irrigation or soaker hoses. This will keep foliage dry and help prevent fungal diseases from setting up.
- Monitor for blossom end rot and apply calcium nitrate as needed.
- Fertilization should be applied at planting and side dressed at vining. Avoid over fertilizing with high nitrogen content to prevent excessive vegetable growth with low blossom set.

**A male pumpkin flower.
Photo by Marcie Wilson**

**A female pumpkin flower with attached ovary (immature fruit). Photo by Marcie Wilson**



**A bee inside a pumpkin flower collecting pollen and fertilizing the fruit in the process. Photo by Marcie Wilson**

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## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q: Can I save seeds from my pumpkin to plant next year?**

A: Yes, but results may vary. If it is a hybrid pumpkin, the seeds may be sterile, or they may not come true to form. If seeds are from a pumpkin patch, there was likely some cross pollination that occurred in the field. If seeds are from a pumpkin you grew in your own backyard, where only one variety was planted, you can save those knowing you will likely get true-to-form pumpkins.

**Q: How do I know if my pumpkins or winter squash are ready to harvest?**

A: When fruit has reached its mature color and size, and also when the skin is hard and does not dent easily when pushed with your thumbnail, it is fully mature and ready to harvest.

**Q: How do I harvest my pumpkins or winter squash?**

A: Cut from the main vine, leaving a 2-inch stem to prolong the storage life of the fruit. Leaving long stems is also recommended for carving pumpkins.

**Q: How do I save seeds from my pumpkin or winter squash?**

A: Save only from open pollinated varieties planted at least 300 feet apart. (A half-mile isolation is ideal.) Remove seeds from fully ripened fruit and clear off all stringy pulp. Rinse the seeds, pat dry and arrange in a single layer on a waxy surface, allowing them to dry fully before storing in a seed envelope or zippered plastic bag. Seeds are fully dry and ready to store when they can be snapped in half. Store in a cool, dark, dry place or in the refrigerator until next year. Seeds are usually viable for up to seven years.

**Q: Is my pumpkin edible?**

A: Yes, including the seeds. While pumpkins are perfectly edible and tasty, winter squash are typically grown primarily for eating purposes, as well as decor. Check variety descriptions for recommended uses and dishes.

**Q: Do I need to wash my pumpkins?**

A: Sterilizing pumpkins, especially carved ones, will prolong the life of the pumpkin and help prevent fungal rot.

**A mature pumpkin.**
**Photo by Marcie Wilson**

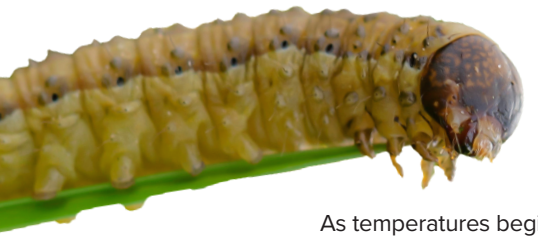
**Q. How long will my winter squash last in storage?**

A: Winter squash will last for several months up to a year or longer when stored properly inside at room temperature out of direct sunlight. Ideal storage conditions are low temperature and moderate humidity.

**Scan here to download the Vegetable Gardening Tips: Squash and Pumpkin Guide for more information on starting a home pumpkin patch from seed to harvest.**

*Marcie Wilson*

*Assistant Extension Horticulture Agent for Tensas, Concordia, Catahoula, Franklin, Madison and East Carroll parishes*



# Fall Caterpillars in Louisiana: What Homeowners Need to Know

As temperatures begin to cool, many gardeners expect insect activity to slow down. However, late summer and early fall are often peak seasons for caterpillar pests in Louisiana. Our long growing season allows many butterflies and moths to produce multiple generations each year, resulting in high caterpillar populations well into October.

Caterpillars are the larval stage of butterflies and moths, which are all in the order Lepidoptera. While many eventually become important pollinators and valuable components of healthy ecosystems, others can cause significant damage to lawns, ornamental plants, shade trees and fall vegetable gardens. Knowing which caterpillars are common during the fall and recognizing their damage allows homeowners to respond before serious injury occurs.

## Lawn Caterpillars

Fall armyworms (*Spodoptera frugiperda*) are among Louisiana's most destructive late-season pests. Despite their name, they are active throughout much of the growing season but frequently reach damaging levels in late summer and early fall. They feed on turfgrass, corn, leafy vegetables and numerous garden crops. Young larvae are difficult to detect, but larger caterpillars can strip foliage quickly, often leaving behind ragged leaves or large brown patches in lawns. A distinctive inverted white "Y" on the head capsule helps identify fall armyworms.

Another common turf pest is the tropical sod webworm. These caterpillars feed primarily on St. Augustinegrass, bermudagrass and zoysia, producing irregular brown patches that are often mistaken for drought stress or disease. Increased bird activity in affected areas is frequently one of the first signs that caterpillars are present.

## Vegetable Garden Pests

Several caterpillars commonly attack cool-season vegetables as gardeners establish fall gardens.

Cabbage loopers (*Trichoplusia ni*) are easily recognized by their characteristic looping movement. They feed on cabbage, broccoli,

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**Top left: Chewed spots show symptoms of tropical sod webworm in turfgrass. Top right: Irregular brown patches can be a sign of tropical sod webworm activity. Bottom left: Tropical sod webworms are common pests of St. Augustinegrass, bermudagrass and zoysia. Bottom right: Late summer and early fall are often peak seasons for caterpillar pests in Louisiana like this tropical sod webworm. Photos by William Afton**

cauliflower, kale, collards, mustard greens and other brassicas, creating irregular holes throughout the leaves. Because eggs and young larvae are often found on the undersides of leaves, regular scouting is essential.

Diamondback moth larvae (*Plutella xylostella*) are another persistent pest of brassica crops. These small, pale green caterpillars produce "windowpane" feeding, which causes thin, clear, or translucent spots, early in development before chewing holes through the foliage. Populations can increase rapidly, and some have developed resistance to certain insecticides, making early detection especially important.

Corn earworms (*Helicoverpa zea*) attack much more than sweet corn. They also infest tomatoes, peppers, okra, beans and other vegetables. Larvae vary in color from green and brown to pinkish, but all share the habit of boring directly into fruits or ears, where they are protected from insecticide applications. Preventing infestations before larvae enters the fruit is the most effective management strategy.

## Landscape and Shade Tree Caterpillars

Not all fall caterpillars are found in the vegetable garden. Several species commonly damage ornamental plants and shade trees.

Redheaded azalea caterpillars (*Datana major*) are among the most striking caterpillars found in Louisiana landscapes. Their bright red heads and black bodies with yellow stripes make them easy to recognize. They feed in large groups and can rapidly defoliate azalea shrubs. Although healthy plants typically recover from a single defoliation event, repeated infestations can weaken shrubs over time.

Fall webworms (*Hyphantria cunea*) are responsible for the large silk webs that often appear on the ends of branches during late summer. Common hosts include pecan, persimmon, sweetgum, walnut and many hardwood trees. Caterpillars feed within these protective webs, which are often more unsightly than harmful. On established trees, damage is usually cosmetic, and small infestations can often be managed by pruning out webbed branches when practical.

## Management Tips

The best defense against caterpillar damage is routine scouting. Inspect plants regularly, paying close attention to leaf undersides, growing points and young fall vegetable transplants where caterpillars often begin feeding.

Small infestations can frequently be managed by hand-removing caterpillars before populations increase. Homeowners should also conserve beneficial insects and other natural enemies, including parasitic wasps and birds, which help suppress caterpillar populations naturally.

Biological insecticides containing *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) provide excellent control of many young caterpillars while having minimal impact on beneficial insects and pollinators. Because Bt is most effective on small larvae, timely applications are important. Always read and follow pesticide label directions before making any application.

Finally, remember that not every caterpillar requires treatment. Many species never reach damaging levels and eventually develop into butterflies or moths that contribute to Louisiana's biodiversity. Correct identification helps determine whether management is necessary.

Louisiana's warm climate supports caterpillar activity well into the fall. By routinely monitoring lawns, landscapes and vegetable gardens, homeowners can detect problems early, protect valuable plants, and avoid unnecessary pesticide applications. A few minutes spent scouting each week can make the difference between minor feeding damage and a major infestation.

*Mark A. Wilson*
*Horticulture Agent, Northwest Region*

# Transplanting Versus Direct Seeding for Leafy Greens

Leafy greens such as collards, kale, lettuce and Swiss chard can be grown by either transplanting or direct seeding. The best choice often depends on the size of your planting, available resources and production goals.

For smaller gardens, transplanting offers better control over spacing, reduces the need for thinning and helps plants establish quickly for an earlier harvest in a limited space. Starting seedlings in a protected environment can also provide a head start on the growing season while other crops are still occupying the intended garden space. In areas where growing space is limited, transplants can allow for quicker crop rotations and more efficient use of available space. Transplanting is especially common for crops like lettuce, where uniform spacing and harvest consistency are often desired.

For larger plantings, direct seeding is usually more efficient and economical. It allows growers to plant large areas quickly without the cost of trays, seed starting mix or greenhouse space. While direct-seeded crops may require thinning and additional weed

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# Staying Cool with Watermelon-Basil Infused Water

August in Louisiana can make even the most devoted gardener think twice about spending time outdoors. Whether you're harvesting vegetables, pulling weeds or simply enjoying the garden, staying hydrated is essential during the hottest part of the year.

While plain water is always a great choice, infused waters offer a simple way to add a little flavor without the sugar found in many soft drinks and sports beverages. One of my favorite late-summer combinations is watermelon and basil. The sweetness of fresh watermelon pairs surprisingly well with the light herbal flavor of basil, creating a refreshing drink that is perfect for hot afternoons.

The best part is that both ingredients may be growing close to home. Watermelon is at its peak during the summer months, and basil often thrives in garden beds, containers and herb gardens well into the fall. Together they create a colorful, attractive infusion that is easy to prepare and enjoyable to share with family and friends.

## Getting More Flavor from Your Infusion

One of the most common mistakes people make when preparing infused water is using fruit and herbs in large pieces. While they may look attractive in a pitcher, large pieces expose relatively little surface area to the water, which limits flavor extraction.

For watermelon-basil infused water, cut the watermelon into thin slices or small pieces rather than large cubes. The same principle applies to basil. Instead of adding whole leaves, gently tear or finely slice the basil before placing it in the infusion. This releases more of the herb's natural oils and allows its flavor to move into the water more efficiently.

If you prefer a slightly stronger watermelon flavor, try adding a small amount of fresh watermelon juice to the pitcher. Simply press a few watermelon pieces through a strainer and add a splash of the juice to the water. This produces a more attractive pink color and enhances the watermelon flavor while maintaining the light, refreshing character that makes infused waters so appealing.

## Keeping Infused Water Safe and Fresh

Because infused waters contain fresh produce, they should be handled with the same care you would use when preparing any fresh food. Before making an infusion, thoroughly wash all fruit and herbs to remove any soil and debris. Avoid using fruit that is bruised, damaged or overripe, as these areas can support the growth of microorganisms that shorten the storage life of the infusion.

For the best flavor, allow the watermelon and basil to infuse in the refrigerator for several hours or overnight. Refrigeration not only helps maintain quality but also slows microbial growth. Once the desired flavor has been reached, remove the fruit and herbs if possible. Infused water is generally best consumed within a few days, though it rarely lasts that long on a hot Louisiana afternoon.

**Top left: For infused water, cut the watermelon into thin slices or small pieces rather than large cubes. Top right: For a stronger watermelon flavor, press a few watermelon pieces through a strainer to add a splash of the juice to the water. Bottom: The sweetness of fresh watermelon pairs well with the flavor of basil to create this infused water. Photos by Michael Polozola**

If serving infused water outdoors, keep it chilled with ice or in a cooler and avoid leaving it at room temperature for extended periods. A cold pitcher of watermelon-basil infused water can be a welcome addition to garden gatherings, outdoor workdays or late-summer family meals.

## Experiment with Your Garden Harvest

One of the best things about infused water is that there is plenty of room for experimentation. While sweet basil and watermelon make an excellent combination, gardeners may also enjoy trying some of the many basil varieties available for home gardens.

Traditional sweet basil provides the familiar flavor most people associate with Italian cooking, while purple basil can add striking color to an infusion. Lemon basil contributes subtle citrus notes, and cinnamon basil offers a hint of spice that can create an interesting twist on traditional fruit-infused water. Different basil varieties can produce surprisingly different results, making them fun additions to beverages as well as the kitchen.

Don't be afraid to experiment with other fruits and herbs from the garden. Cucumbers, strawberries, blueberries, lemons and mint can all be used to create refreshing combinations. Half the fun of infused water is discovering a blend that suits your taste.

As Louisiana's summer heat continues, a pitcher of watermelon-basil infused water can be a refreshing reward after time spent in the garden. With a few simple ingredients and a little creativity, gardeners can turn part of their harvest into a flavorful way to stay hydrated throughout the season.

*Michael Polozola, Ph.D.*
*Assistant Professor*

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**Top left: Brassica green seedlings grow in cell trays prior to transplanting into the field. Top right: A four-point seeder can be used to direct seed loose-leaf greens that can have smaller spacing. Bottom left: Raised garden beds work well for containing a variety of cool-season greens. Bottom right: This in-ground garden row is being cultivated with a wheel hoe before direct seeding. The loose-leaf greens to the right were previously established using a four-point seeder.**
**Photos by Molly Lyles**

management, the labor savings can be significant. Direct-seeded plants also develop their root systems in place without the disturbance of transplanting, which can be an advantage.

There are only a few situations where I choose to transplant into a large garden, such as when I want an early crop and need to start plants in the greenhouse ahead of time, or when I am growing a specialty variety with limited seed and want to ensure as much germination and plant survival as possible. For larger plantings, I rely on tools such as a seeder for direct seeding and an auger to make transplanting faster and less labor-intensive when needed.

Both methods can produce healthy crops. Transplanting is often best for smaller plantings and early harvests, while direct seeding is a practical option for larger gardens. Ultimately, the decision comes down to the grower and what works best for your system.

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