

Five ways to prepare now for gardening in 2021

Nicole Sanchez

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Gardening in all forms- from window boxes to major landscape renovations- surged in 2020. Whether for mental peace, food security, or a meaningful “socially distanced pastime”, people turned to gardening this year. Increased interest in all things gardening led to temporary shortages in seeds and plants this year, causing a similar surge in interest in seed banks and seed saving.

Now that freezing nights have put an end to most gardening this year in the Klamath Basin, some forward- thinking gardeners are already looking ahead to next year. Recent horticulture questions at the Extension office included seed saving techniques, advice for over-wintering small trees, how to prepare beds for winter, and this: Given that 2021 is projected to be equally popular food gardening, will there be shortages of seeds and plants again? How can a gardener prepare now, in the quiet time? Following are a few suggestions.

Organic Fertilizers have benefits to the soil beyond nutrient content, including soil building and water retention properties. One challenge to using organic fertilizers is the long breakdown time in the soil before plants can access the nutrients. Depending on the compound (bone meal, kelp, dried fish, cottonseed meal are examples), it may take weeks to months of appropriate soil interactions to make the nutrients into a form plants can take up. OSU evaluates the values and breakdown times of various organic fertilizers here: <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/crop-production/organic/nitrogen-phosphorus-potassium-values-organic-fertilizers>. Some of these are best applied in the fall for spring and growing season availability.

Organic Material should not be confused with organic fertilizers. Fertilizers have known nutrient components and are applied to address specific nutrient needs, while “organic matter” refers to carbon based items like mulch, leaves, or compost. Organic matter is typically applied to build soil structure and water building capacity, or top off raised beds. It may be easier to incorporate this material into soil in the fall- in spring, soils can be cold, heavy, and water saturated with melting snows. For an analysis of different types of organic matter and their benefits, see: <https://www.canr.msu.edu/hrt/uploads/535/78622/Organic-Matters-figure-6pgs.pdf>

Building Beds might also be worth pursuing now. If snow sits on the ground late into spring, it may be more difficult to construct raised beds as early as preferred to be in place for the growing season. For the “less handy” gardeners among us who will hire someone to build raised beds, contractors might be more available now than in spring- or prefer clients getting in the queue to have the work done ahead of the desired build. Raised beds make gardening easier for those with physical challenges, make small scale season extension easy to apply, and help minimize some pest issues.

Seed Saving. There is still time to save some types of seeds this year. Methods vary depending on seed type: seed saving is a science unto itself. Reducing moisture content in the seed and keeping it at consistent temperature once cured are important for every seed type. The most common mistakes newbie seed savers make revolve around not understanding the differences between open- pollinated any hybrid seeds: seeds from hybrids often produce plants that perform or look unlike their parents. Another common mistake is mixing cultivars of like vegetables. If saving seeds, don't plant the jalapeno peppers next to the sweet pimientos- the seeds will have unreliable characteristics.

Seed Orders. Chances are that there will be some seed shortages, for both vegetables and ornamentals, in the 2021 planting season. Seed catalogs typically come out the first of every new year- 2021 may be the year to sit down with those catalogs and order right away, or even order some of the remaining seed available from this year's fall and winter catalogs. Most seed companies won't automatically substitute with another seed packet if what you order is not available (gardeners tend to have strong and specific preferences). In 2020, covid restrictions made contacting customers regarding potential substitutions almost impossible at most mail order seed companies, where order volume was 8-10 times normal. Consider supplying alternative/ substitute varieties or writing "any similar variety accepted in event of unavailability" in the special notes on your order.

With the short growing season available to gardeners in the Klamath Basin, some bed preparation in late fall saves time in the spring- get those garden beds covered up for the winter, then start planning ahead for the gardening possibilities ahead. Next week: a look at plants that may be in short supply in 2021.