



# BACKYARD BONANZA

## TOP 10 GARDEN TIPS FOR 2010

By Karin Ursula Edmondson

**P**rincipal garden tip: Just Do It. Do—synonymous with sow and plant—something in your backyard, front yard, field, sidewalk median planter strip, or container. If you do something edible, sustenance for the body complements nourishment for the soul. Start small to not overwhelm, but do “think outside the philosophy of the last 100 years that emphasized lawn with a few ornamentals and puffy shrubs,” advises Diane Greenberg of Catskill Native Nursery. Cultivate curiosity about culture and companion plantings of your selected plants. Gardens can be as wild, profuse, and diverse as nature itself. Ethan Roland of Appleseed Permaculture urges “transformation of gardens into abundant, thriving ecosystems. Mimic natural systems and their incredible diversity and plant communities rather than monocultures. Nature never plants single plants.” Spend more time in the garden but “less of it struggling against nature,” suggests Mark Oppenheimer of the Inner Garden. “Your garden should be a retreat, not a battle.”

### 1. Think & Plan

Avid gardeners start thinking (really, dreaming) about gardens in January when seed catalogs arrive. Plot the square footage of your garden. Draw a plan of what goes where. Compose a Seed Wish List by putting pen to paper rather than willy-nilly earmarking followed by rampant ordering. This will save money, reduce seed waste, and bring you back to reality regarding available space. Pooling seed orders with friends and neighbors also helps reduce seed waste and shipping costs. Nancy Bubel’s *The New Seed Starter’s Handbook* is indispensable.

Inventory items from seeds to tools. Most seeds when stored properly in a cool dark place have a shelf life of one to two years. Also check the condition of garden equipment like shovels, hoes, spades, rakes, pruners, and shears. If you didn’t clean and oil them up after last year’s season, do so now. If you’ve been considering another tool for the collection, like a spading fork, then purchase it before you get out into the field.

### 2. Reconnaissance

Pull on the Wellies or Muck Boots and head out into the garden. “The first thing I would recommend,” says Jane Lehmuller at Ninebark LLC, “is for people to get outside and assess the damage from heavy, wet snow. Now is the time to prune those broken branches and any suckers or waterspouts.” Mel Bellar of Andes-based Zone 4 Landscapes advises: “Conifer branches, particularly very upright varieties, tend to have branches that get weighed down and misshapen with ice or heavy snow. Tie up the branches with some twine—green is nice because it disappears—until they regain their shape or stay in place on their own.”

### 3. Prune

*Know for what you prune.* Pruning is the art of regulating and controlling growth, flowering, and fruiting. Different plants require different pruning methods and timing and keeping it all straight is much easier with a good book on pruning. Early spring pruning is practical because it does not depend on thawed ground and absent foliage can’t complicate matters. First, prune off any branches on trees and shrubs that didn’t make it through winter. “Check if a branch is dead by scraping off a little of the bark off. See green under the bark? It is alive. See brown when you scrap down, it is dead,” says Greenberg. Spring is opportune to prune shrubs and trees that don’t bloom on old wood. Bellar begins with cutting off the prior year’s blooms and taking out any dead wood. “Dead wood is an invitation to pest and disease. Take out crossed branches and thin out up to one third of the branches with an eye toward creating a nice shape and encouraging new growth for a fluffy, full plant.” For edibles, Lehmuller advises gardeners to “prune fruit trees for a better yield and summer and fall blooming shrubs for a better shape but don’t touch any spring blooming shrubs until after they bloom.”

### 4. Vernal Revamp

Mundane but necessary chores such as raking leaves and other debris out of beds,

contemplate editing and restructuring. Greenberg advises “keeping an eye on the beds over the next few weeks, pulling up any perennials or shrubs that didn’t survive the winter. Move plants that aren’t doing well to better locations *before* they break bud. Basic rule—if it blooms in the spring, move it in the fall. If it blooms in the fall, move it in the spring. Never move a blooming plant.” Spring’s cool weather is suitable for the labor-intensive tasks of dividing and moving. Ornamental grasses such as maiden or switch grass prefer to be divided in spring, and after a couple of years’ establishment, a single purchased plant can yield a mass planting. After digging the root ball up, a straight edge shovel or pruning saw will effectively divide the clump. Perennials can be divided in spring or fall, and strong opinions abound on optimal times, “but it often actually depends on how much time I have and what I feel like doing,” admits Bellar.

## 5. Plant Edibles

2010 might be the year that edibles and ornamentals finally reach an ecstatic symbiotic coexistence in the garden. Rhubarb, fennel, and asparagus have dramatic foliage habits that add spectacular visual interest to gardens, can provide screening or become a focal point in the garden. Hazelnut shrubs make a beautiful edible hedge. Wet spot problem areas make hospitable homes for elderberry and high-bush blueberry—“plants that enjoy wet feet,” says Greenberg, who also recommends mulberry to feed both humans and birds. “Chard, eggplant, peppers, or climbing beans taste great and look great,” says Lehmmuller. “Interplant them with perennials and annuals. Dwarf apple or pear trees fit in almost anywhere and are easy to maintain.” Roland encourages people to grow their own fertilizer with nitrogen fixers like clover, licorice, or groundnut and interplant some aromatic pest confusers like shallots, horseradish, or bee balm. For fruits, he suggests attracting beneficial insects with fennel, yarrow, or borage and using chicory, sorrel, or chives as nutrient accumulators. A good book on companion plantings: *The Rodale Book of Herbs* (1974 ed.). Hardy perennial vegetables like climbing spinach, sea kale, sunchokes, water celery, profusion sorrel, and Welsh onion offer tasty yearly returns on initial investment. For detailed information on finding, planting, harvesting, and eating these plants check Eric Toensmeier’s book *Perennial Vegetables* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007).

Local fruit tree guru Lee Reich recommends against apple trees unless “you’re planning to spray regularly and gain some expertise in pruning.” He extols the virtues of planting blueberries: “They’re easy to grow, healthful, pretty plants and taste great. Prepare the soil to their liking with peat moss in the planting hole, pelletized sulfur for acidity, and two to three inches of wood chips, leaves, pine needles, or wood shavings as mulch.” Pawpaws, American persimmons, Cornealian cherries, pears, and medlars are some other easy-to-grow fruit trees. Plant strawberries and raspberries in spring and eat them through the fall.

## 6. Raise Your Beds

Channel Ruth Stout or Masanobu Fukuoka with the latest garden wisdom of no-till planting to preserve beneficial microbes within the soil, prevent erosion, and ensure the health of your back. “No de-sodding is necessary,” says Lehmmuller. “Lay down layers of newspaper or cardboard and cover it with a 3-to-4-inch layer of coarse mulch to smother any thing underneath. Lay the cedar boxes on top and fill with a good quality organic soil/compost mix.” Because they drain quickly, raised beds are especially good for herbs but need careful monitoring to prevent drying out. Raised beds out of stone offer optimal drainage and aesthetic value while “building an eternal relationship with the Earth’s offspring,” says Christopher Layman at Fox Stonework. “Stone is safe, dependable, and forever beautiful.”

## 7. Mulch

Some gardeners like Greenberg advise pulling up old mulch and yearly remulching beds because “mulch is crucial to a healthy garden, retaining moisture in the soil, and breaking down and feeding the plants. For problems with weeds, use a layer of brown paper or newspaper under the mulch to suppress the existing weedy seed bank in the soil, but don’t suffocate the existing plants. Put newspaper around them and spread the mulch on top to cover. Avoid commercial landscaping cloth; weeds love to grow on top of it and it blocks decomposing mulch from enriching the soil.” Other professional gardeners, Bellar among them, consider yearly remulching overkill and avoid the practice; however, he admits that

showing to not make it more difficult for them.” Wood-chip or other moisture-retaining mulch is detrimental rather than beneficial to heat-loving plants like lavender or tomatoes or peppers. Mulch with light colored pea gravel, small crushed stone, or sand instead to trap and reflect heat. Adventurous? Try new mulches like licorice root mulch, sold as Right Dress Garden Mulch. More self-reliant and thrifty? Use straw or grass clippings from your own lawn or meadow, or check with your local municipality for free wood-chip mulch.

## 8. Compost

A well-managed compost pile is a repository for both organic kitchen and garden clippings, eliminating the need for cartage and providing a source of nutrient-rich soil amendment, diminishing the overall garden costs. General composition requirements for a compost pile are one-third dry materials (leaf litters, straw), one-third green materials (kitchen waste including bones, tea leaves, coffee grounds, eggshells, and citrus rinds but excluding meats and oils), and one-third soil—the top layer to speed decomposition and keep the odor down to a minimal level. If space allows, a three-bin system is the most dynamic according to Bellar. “One is ready to use, one is almost there and only gets new material that breaks down really quickly, and one that is just starting where most new garden debris gets dumped.” Winter doesn’t have to halt composting—Bellar keeps a garbage can with air holes outside the back door for his kitchen scraps. “It is so heavy in the spring that I have to use a hand truck to get it to the compost bin to dump it.”

## 9. Hardscapes

Inanimate garden elements such as trellises, fences, fountains, and other structures are considered hardscapes. During Northeast winters, movement can take place in the Earth, causing stones to shift and posts to get shaky. Bellar advises to “check where a screw is loose (except your own) or a piece of wood is rotting. A little attention now can keep people from tripping on a tippy stone or stop a trellis from collapsing midseason.” Lehmmuller believes that “in this area fences are a must not only for deer but for resident woodchucks, skunks, and rabbits. A fine wire-mesh-with-cedar-post fence can disappear into the landscape, or, better yet, become a sculptural/decorative part of the garden.” Greenberg encourages “adding a fountain to drown out undesirable noise.” Consider adding objets d’art—“found or otherwise obtained and change the compositions throughout the year as inspiration bids, be it hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, or seasonally. Start planning and gathering materials now,” recommends Oppenheimer.

## 10. Critter Control

Defending delectable garden smorgasbords against the region’s resident critters is constant component of gardening. Fences provide fool-proof protection from hungry critters yet are costly to build. Chemicals and toxins are out. In are natural repellants like Liquid Fence and Plantskydd—both very smelly and not pleasant to apply but effective. Bellar tried Plantskydd, a blood product, this past year and over the winter to save his evergreens, and admits, “It is a little harder to use but lasts longer and does not have to be reapplied after every rain like Liquid Fence.” Milorganite is a small pellet fertilizer that is also a very effective deer repellent in the early spring, when the young shoots are extra-tasty and close to the ground.” Roland promotes the use of “aromatic pest confusers”—members of the allium family. Critters’ sensitive noses avoid strongly scented chives, onions, shallots, garlic, and bunching onions. Interplant freely amidst ornamentals and edibles. Alliums usually have strongly defined blue-green leaf structure and interesting round seed heads for aesthetics. Plus, humans enjoy eating them too. 🍷

## RESOURCES

**Appleseed Permaculture** [www.appleseedpermaculture.com](http://www.appleseedpermaculture.com)

**Catskill Native Nursery** [www.catskillnativenursery.com](http://www.catskillnativenursery.com)

**Fox Stoneworks** [www.foxstone.weebly.com](http://www.foxstone.weebly.com)

**Inner Garden** [innergarden@aol.com](mailto:innergarden@aol.com)

**Ninebark LLC** [www.ninebarkllc.com](http://www.ninebarkllc.com)

**Lee Reich** [www.leereich.com](http://www.leereich.com)

**Zone 4 Landscapes** [www.zone4landscapes.com](http://www.zone4landscapes.com)

**Licorice Root Mulch** (860) 619-8028