

# LETTING THE GARDEN SLEEP

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It can be sad to stop growing and harvesting plants for the year, even though important work remains to prune dormant plants, build paths, and read gardening catalogs even when the snow falls (not often enough for my taste).

A good supply of fall lettuce comes from our cold frame, but it's no recompense for the overwhelming abundance

of fresh herbs and vegetables we almost take for granted in summer.

At a certain point in late fall or early winter, I bid goodnight to my garden and tuck it in for its long sleep. I usually begin my ritual by walking the bounds of the garden and giving thanks for the bounty it has provided. This walk reminds me of the procession I made with my seeds in the spring.

The hard part follows, making an offering of final fruits. I do so by gently uprooting a basil plant or other annual that I know will not over-winter. I then take this plant to an offering stone where I left my first harvest, and with a prayer I leave it to turn into mulch beneath the oak tree.

This done, it becomes time to gather (or scatter) any last seeds, put away the sticks for the trellises, then clean up the other plants that have faded. A complete list of these chores could fill many pages, but most specialized works about classes of plants provide some guidance about the habits, and needs, of the plant after it finishes producing

flowers or fruit. Much of my labor involves removing some annuals and the stems of some herbs and vegetables. In the spirit of reusing everything, I also save a bundle of the stems to help start the first fires in our fireplace and wood stove or, if those have already been lit, to kindle a bale-fire near Imbolc, the neo-pagan sabbat that falls on February 1, when we celebrate the return of light and the first stirrings of Mother Earth after winter.

Back in the garden, for perennials such as my yarrows or Lemon Balm I cut back the stems enough to look good, but not so far that I'll forget what was there come early spring. Once again, I save some stems for the lighting fires. Tidying up in this way brings more closure to the great work of the harvest, and it makes the garden ready for its winter blanket—in my case a mulch of oak leaves that have been shredded by a pass or two with the lawn mower. This can provide a good layer of protection if a sudden freeze comes; the extra mulch might save a plant that would otherwise perish in our fickle Mid-Atlantic weather. In spring, I'll remove the leaves from the herb beds and till the rest into the vegetable garden.

### A Last Garden Meal

Fern and I made a spiritually charged meal focused on the last basil we can harvest. Every week during the summer, we enjoy fresh pesto sauce:

- ❖ 1/4 cup+ fruity (first pressing) olive oil
- ❖ 3+ cloves garlic, pressed through a garlic press
- ❖ 1/4 cup pine nuts
- ❖ 1/2 cup grated Romano or Parmesan cheese (buy good variety such as Pecorino Romano or Reggiano Parmesan—you will taste the difference)
- ❖ Lots of basil—a large salad bowl of picked and rinsed leaves

- ❖ to prepare, lightly mix the oil with the garlic in a blender, set to “chop.” Add the basil, and more oil if needed, until basil is fully chopped. Add cheese and nuts, blend until creamy (adding more oil if needed). Add salt if desired, and serve over high-quality pasta. “Chunky” varieties of pasta work best to hold the pesto in their nooks and crannies.
- ❖ Extra pesto freezes well. Use an old ice-cube tray and fill it to make "pesto cubes" for a quick dinner during the dark time of the year.

Serve this with a full-bodied red wine you have set aside for the occasion. Be sure to pour a libation in the garden to thank the Good Earth for Her bounty. The last batch of pesto every year is a wistful event, and it marks the end of summer for me, even if the meal takes place in December. By the time you read this, your only pesto may be a final batch you froze! Even so, make that a special meal and give thanks for all the garden has given you.