

Garden Club Horticultural Hints

October 2023

Goodbye to the soggy summer (and September) of 2023!



Containers designed for summer need to be taken apart, cleaned and stored for the winter. The exceptions are containers that can withstand freezing weather – usually metal, wood and certain plastic and foam containers. Once cleaned, winter-hardy containers can be replanted for fall and winter color with small evergreens, ornamental kale, colorful grasses and perennials such as Heuchera. Remember to water planted containers into the winter because the soil in the pot will dry out on sunny days.

Plants that summered outside may be root-bound so, cut away excess roots as you move them to a new container.



Last call for houseplants. It has been cold outside and your houseplants are not happy. Clean them up, repot (if they have outgrown their old container over the summer) and check for any uninvited occupants. It is also a good time to prune them back into shape if they have been growing too vigorously, or to divide them to share with friends. They may be unhappy as they adjust to the lower light and dryer conditions of your home. While they need water, be careful not to overwater them. Hold off fertilizing them for now.



In the vegetable garden. Some vegetables will survive light to moderate frosts. Spinach can tolerate a light frost. Members of the cabbage family such as kale and Brussels sprouts taste sweeter after expose to frost. Root crops including parsnips, salsify and even carrots and turnips can be left in the ground for later harvests, especially if protected by a light covering of straw or chopped leaves.



Cleanup time. Vegetables and flower beds need a thorough clean-up this month. Remove all old foliage. Bag any diseased or insect-infested material and send it to the dump. Taking these actions now allows your plants to get a fresh start next spring, without the risk of infection from this year's problems. 'Clean' foliage should go into your compost bin or to your town's compost center.

A raised-bed planter can provide several degrees of additional protection against autumn frosts, especially if the gardener adds a frame for nighttime protection with a row cover or even an old sheet.

Cleaning up the perennial bed doesn't mean cutting to the ground. The traditional advice for cleaning up your perennial garden in October was to cut everything to the ground. Science – and common sense based on observation – says that practice took away a valuable food source for both migrating and over-wintering birds. Instead, leave up the flower stalks with seed heads birds. Migrating birds appreciate the food. And it is vital for those species that over-winter in New England. In addition to less work for you, the birds make your garden a more interesting place throughout the winter. The 'no-cut' policy isn't universal, though. Always vigorously clean up any plant that has battled disease this year. Again, you'll save yourself work and enjoy your garden more in the spring.



Plant seeds that need winter chilling like bachelor buttons and milkweed now. Would you like more butterflies? Plant swamp milkweed. That dismal name disguises a plant with a lovely pink flower with a wonderful scent. And, later in the season, swamp milkweed will be visited by many butterflies, including our endangered Monarchs for which the milkweed is required to produce the next generation.



Finish harvesting the vegetable garden. Our wet September was accompanied by warmer nighttime temperatures and an extended gardening season. Don't get caught by a seasonal frost. Complete your harvest of your tender vegetables now. Basil, for example, will turn black when temperatures drop to 32 degrees even for a brief period, and tomatoes become unusable once the liquid in them freezes. Once you've harvested your frost-sensitive vegetables, turn your attention to harvesting, cleaning and storing your remaining fresh produce.



Keep mowing, with the mower set to two inches for as long as your grass keeps growing. Mow leaves into the lawn. Mowing saves you the task of raking and, by chopping leaves into small pieces, they will break down over the winter. It's a virtuous cycle – putting vital nutrients back into the soil, for the grass and surrounding trees for the coming season.

Written and created by Betty Sanders. For more horticultural suggestions for October and throughout the year, please visit www.BettyOnGardening.com