

The Garden in October
By Rachel Anderson

Somebody flipped the switch. One day it's warm and sunny with blue sky as far as the eye can see. The next day, the sky is filled with broody clouds and a stiff breeze is causing the newly fallen leaves to dryly scuttle across the pavement. Oh yeah, and it's raining. Pouring actually. Believe it or not, I missed our old friend rain; our summer was so dry and warm and sunny. Don't get me wrong, I loved it! But I also love this new season. Here's why: Soup, sweaters, and soggy feet! Just kidding! I don't like soggy feet, but like it or not that's just part of fall in the Pacific Northwest.

In the ornamental garden:

Enjoy the fall color! If you're not wowed by your garden in fall, consider the following plants, which also happen to be a few favorites of mine:

- *Acer japonica* 'Aconitifolium' is a stunning Japanese maple of smallish stature; it only grows to about 12 feet. The leaves are deeply cut and turn from scarlet in early fall to a deep burgundy by the time they fall off at the end of the month.
- Any variety of smoke bush, or *Cotinus*. Their fiery hues of orange and scarlet are so bright you'll see them even when you close your eyes!
- If I had to choose a favorite grass for fall I would have to go with *Miscanthus*. I love their silky tassels and purplish-gold fall color. Plus, they're beautiful in winter too. The tassels fluff up and turn a tawny gold and the plant itself maintains its structure, lending interest to a season that sometimes seems lacking in the garden.
- For flowers, I love asters. Bees do too. I have a neat one blooming in my garden right now called *Aster laevis* 'Calliope'. It has bluish lavender daisies on tall (5'!), sturdy black stems. It's gorgeous! It's a little hard to come by but worth the search.

I actually have loads of favorite plants for all seasons and I want you to know how difficult it was to narrow it down to just a few! Remember if you're ever needing inspiration stop by the Nursery and see what's looking good. I bet you can't go home empty handed!

- Shake the spiders out of your rubber boots! The rains have come again and it's time to switch out the foot wear accordingly.
- Plant bulbs! Don't miss this narrow window of opportunity! All the interesting bulbs sell first and fast so don't miss out. Also, if you buy bulbs remember to plant them. I think we've all brought home a bag or two or three of tulips or daffodils and put them in the garage with the promise to get to them later. Then when spring rolls around we come across that same bag of now soft, slightly moldy tulip bulbs that never made it in the ground. Oops! When that happens I always say better late than never. I plant them and keep my fingers crossed. I've been pleasantly surprised before!
- Bring in any house plants that have summered outdoors. Check closely for bugs and other critters that are best left outside. I remember once bringing in my citrus and a couple of days later seeing a trail of shimmering slime winding its way up the wall. I never did find that slug, poor guy!

- Clean up time! Rake leaves, pull weeds, cut things back. Don't be too tidy though. Leave grasses alone for now; they are interesting and pretty long into the winter. Leave the seed heads of perennials for the birds. Don't prune roses or fruit trees yet, but do a good job of raking up their leaves, especially if they're diseased. There's a fine line between a garden that looks ignored and a garden that has been gone through and tidied but still looks natural, beautiful, and seasonal.
- I swear one of my favorite things about gardening is that nothing stays the same. There is always change happening, whether it's the natural flow of the turning seasons or whether it's change that you orchestrate. A garden is always in flux and that is the way it's supposed to be! We as gardeners know this and embrace it, which is why October is such an exciting month for us. It's an excellent time for planting new plants, and moving existing plants around and dividing favorite perennials to make more free plants, which is what everybody needs! It's a very industrious time to be a gardener even though outwardly the garden is slowly winding down towards dormancy.
- I'll only say it once. The holidays are just around the corner. There. Remember to pot up a few pots of paperwhites for Thanksgiving and Christmas. They take about 6 weeks to bloom, so there's a bit of planning involved, but they are so worth it! Also, think about Amaryllis. They take a bit longer-usually 8-10 weeks before they show off their flamboyantly exotic flowers.
- Spread mulch to help protect the roots of new and established plants from winter freeze damage. Mulch also helps to keep weeds at bay and nourishes the soil. I like to use a bark/compost combo (Skagit soils have a nice mix). I will also sometimes just use fallen leaves as long as they're not buggy or diseased. It doesn't look quite as neat as fresh compost, but I'm ok with that. The leaves are free after all!

In the edible garden:

- Leave sunflower heads out for the birds to enjoy.
- Make sure any seedlings that you plan to overwinter are generously spaced to allow good air circulation. Mulch them with straw (not hay!), leaves, or compost for extra insulation. Sometimes I will stake a few things too, like Brussels sprouts, to help keep them upright during high winds.
- Plant garlic towards the end of this month or the beginning of November. Spread a deep layer of straw over the bed to protect new roots and shoots.
- Any beds you plan to leave fallow this winter should be mulched also. Bare soil is subject to compaction due to all the rain we get, and an extra layer between the elements and your soil will help to keep it loose. Soil is precious! It's important to take good care of it, especially when it comes to growing food.
- Harvest fall fruits. Don't leave this food on the tree or let it fall to the ground to rot. If you have too much, food banks and Skagit Gleaners would be happy to help you out.

Have fun dodging raindrops this month! Embrace the new season and celebrate the change that is happening in your garden. Make soup! Dig out your sweaters! Definitely invest in a good pair of water proof shoes! Being outdoors is so much more fun when your feet are warm and dry.