

The Garden in August

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Hallelujah! Let the good news ring down from above and echo in all the valleys! My crepe myrtle is going to bloom this year! Finally! After 9 years! While this may not seem "Hallelujah" worthy to some of you, it is for me and I need to share the good news because there is a cat to thank in the end.

I bought my crepe myrtle because I saw the most lovely display of these plants, blooming and glorious, at the Center for Urban Horticulture in Seattle. There were many different varieties all looking perfect and beautiful despite being planted in CUH's parking lot. They were planted in a hot area with poor soil and were neglected. I was smitten at once and had to have one. I had the perfect spot in my parking strip in Anacortes! I planted a variety called 'Zuni', a smallish tree 8-10 feet tall. I think it has purple flowers, but I honestly don't remember. I have refrained from looking it up because I want to be surprised.

If you're not familiar with crepe myrtles a.k.a *Lagerstroemia indica*, that's okay. They're not commonly planted around here as they tend to be more synonymous with the south. That being said, there are a handful of Indian named varieties introduced by the U.S. National Arboretum that are hardy down to USDA zone 5 (we're zone 7). These are the varieties that are most commonly available in our neck of the woods. Crepe myrtles are known not only for their showy flowers (IF they flower, more on that later), but they also have gorgeous fall color, rivaling many Japanese maples, and beautiful, multicolored peeling bark for winter interest. The new growth in spring is colorful too. They're drought tolerant, pest resistant, and the deer don't eat them. So there's a lot to recommend crepe myrtles even if they never flower, which is why I was perfectly content with mine as just an unusual foliage specimen. Then this summer I noticed flower buds! Why now? It turns out that crepe myrtles bloom on new growth, and my poor tortured specimen put out very little new growth each year probably because I don't tend to water a lot, especially in my parking strip.

This year is different, however, because of two things. First, I planted a dahlia near the crepe myrtle that I adore and don't want to die of dehydration. And second, our kitty Ernie was killed earlier this summer and we buried him beneath the crepe myrtle, where he liked to hang out in the evenings on the warm sidewalk, greeting passersby. Naturally, I planted a catmint atop his grave, which he adored to such a degree that I could never grow it because he would roll in it and eat it down to nothing. I did NOT want this new start of catmint to die of drought because it is a very special symbol of our good friend.

To make a long story short, I watered that section of our parking strip more than usual. And lo and behold, the crepe myrtle sprouted new growth followed by flower buds! They are yet to open. Keeping my fingers crossed. And thanking Ernie.

In the garden:

- If you don't have an automatic irrigation system, then you're probably pretty tired of hand watering. However, just because August brings a few cooler days (hopefully!) and more foggy mornings, it's not time to give up on the watering quite yet. Keep going! And if it was difficult for you to keep up with it this season, maybe consider having an irrigation system installed next year.
- For me, August in the garden always conjures up the image of crispy dry lawns and tired bloomed out perennials that have begun to flop over in their rush towards a more restful time. After all, they've been working hard and going strong for months now! They deserve a nap!

However, there are some amazing perennials that are just now coming in to their season, ready and willing to take over for their earlier blooming cousins. Look for *Rudbeckia*, *Echinacea*, Asters, Goldenrod, and *Miscanthus*. These late summer stars are at their best in August and September.

- Divide bearded Iris if your clumps are getting too large or didn't bloom very well last spring. Remember to replant the rhizomes shallowly or they will not flower.
- This bit of advice is going to sound crazy to those of you who still have both feet firmly planted in summer, but towards the end of this month the Nursery will have begun to get in their bulbs for fall planting. That means bearded *Iris*, *Crocus*, *Narcissus*, *Allium*...so it's time to start thinking about next spring! What?! Crazy! But smart gardeners know that timing is everything and planning ahead makes good garden sense.
- Remember tent caterpillars? Remember how frustrating and devastating they were? I had nearly forgotten about them until one day when I was taking a slow stroll around my garden and I noticed a fresh tent caterpillar egg case on a low branch of one of my apple trees. It was still soft to the touch, but I had a hard time peeling it off the branch and when I turned it over, there was row upon row of tiny eggs ready and waiting for another season of garden destruction. Be on the lookout for these egg cases throughout the rest of the season. They are silvery gray and resemble a small blob of foam adhered to a woody branch, especially but not exclusively on fruit trees. Pick them off and destroy them because they will inevitably hatch into tent caterpillars.

In the edible garden:

- If you're interested in keeping a winter garden, there's still time to sow seeds for many veggie crops. Try spinach, radicchio, cabbage, kale, and radishes. Sow peas, lettuce, and radishes for fall harvest. The sooner the better for peas.
- A late summer batch of cabbage white butterfly larvae is emerging about now, so be on the lookout and hand pick them when you see them, or use a floating row cover. If you have a large area and a heavy infestation, Bt can be used as a last resort. This pest is a pretty, creamy white butterfly with 1 to 4 black spots on its wings. It has an erratic flight pattern. The larvae are green (or sometimes purple if they're feeding on purple cabbage) and favor brassicas like kale, cabbage, broccoli, brussels sprouts....The larvae can quickly turn a lovely patch of cabbage into a holey mess, stunting growth and disfiguring your crop.
- Empty veggie beds are great candidates for cover crops. Sow buckwheat, bee bread (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*), or calendula and let it go. These plants grow quickly and smother weeds. They provide a nectar source for many beneficial insects and when finally turned under, will feed the soil for next year's crops.

I hope everyone has a 'hallelujah' moment this summer! It is so much fun to make a discovery and learn something new, even if it is the most basic of things. It doesn't matter where it comes from as long it

makes you smile (or scrunch up you face in bewilderment) and want to know more. I realize I've said this a million times, but we gardeners are so lucky to have these opportunities to ask questions and learn from the things that are happening right in our own backyards. Keep asking questions, and learning and above all, keep gardening!