

The Garden in October

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturist

One of my favorite things about being a gardener is knowing that nothing stays the same. Things change all the time, whether it's because of something big like the changing of the seasons, or something small like when the delphiniums all begin to bloom at the same time, hogging all the attention in that particular area of the garden. And then they're done and it's someone else's turn to shine. Flowers come and go, seasons turn from one to the next and the only thing that is constant is the fact that everything changes. Almost on a daily basis. It's awesome!

In the garden:

- Cut any herbaceous perennials down to the ground that are looking ratty and tired, especially those that bloomed earlier in the season like Peonies, Phlox, and Delphiniums. I like to leave Asters, Rudbeckia, and Echinacea for a while longer since I know the birds like to pick at the seed heads. Plus, they are still sort of interesting and pretty in the garden.
- Rake fallen leaves into your garden beds as a mulch over the winter. Doing this helps to keep weeds down, insulates the soil (which is especially great for new plantings), provides habitat for beneficial garden critters which in turn, provides forage for birds over the winter. Be sure the leaves you are using aren't diseased or buggy like those from roses and some fruit trees sometimes tend to be.
- October is a great time to get new plants in the ground. If you've been waiting to revamp your garden until rain and cooler temps allow, then this is your window of opportunity. The soil is still warm which encourages new root growth and natural rain fall can usually be counted on to help get things established before next summer. Remember, if October and November turn out to be somewhat dry months, it is important to hand water any new plants! Even though it seems cool and damp outside, most of that dampness will not make its way down to the root zone.
- Divide perennials that have out grown their space or have declined in vigor. Bearded Iris, upright Sedum, and phlox are good candidates. I like to dig up the entire clump (a true chore with phlox - that plant is tenacious!), and once it's out of the ground, I rather unceremoniously chop it into quarters (or smaller) with a spade. With Iris I am a bit more careful, preferring to dig them up with a garden fork and gently pry the rhizomes apart with my fingers. I toss the shriveled ones and the smallest ones and keep those that are fattest, firmest, and have the most eyes to replant. Take care not to plant them too deeply or they may not bloom for you next year. Keep the rhizome just at soil level and tuck the roots in firmly.
- Don't forget to pick up some paper whites to start indoors at some time this month. They take about 6-8 weeks from the time you plant them to the time they bloom, so if you want blooms for Thanksgiving, plan ahead and get them started about mid-month or so.
- 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 thinking we'll 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 into 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 been on vacation outdoors. Check closely for bugs and slugs and ask them to kindly stay outside, please and thank you.
- Clean up time! Rake leaves, pull weeds and cut things back. Don't be too tidy though. Leave grasses alone for now; they are interesting pretty long into the winter. Leave the seed heads of perennials on 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.

In the edible garden:

- Leave sunflower heads out for the birds (and squirrels) to enjoy.
- Make sure any seedlings 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.

It's soup and tea season. Dig out the wool sweaters and shake the spiders from long forgotten rain boots. Make pumpkin pie. Enjoy the seasonal change and celebrate fall!