

## Gardening Notes for October

October marks the true start of autumn and much work for the gardener! We are now racing against time to complete our chores before that first strong frost. September was a fairly dry month, so watering chores are certainly high on the list! Always remember to take a moment and make some notes about your garden. Among other details, take note of what annuals are still looking respectable, which late season vegetables are living up to expectations, and perhaps what woody plants or perennials should be added to enhance the autumn garden for next year!

### Things to do:

#### Bulbs

- Finish ordering and start planting spring flowering bulbs. Whether it is a corm, true bulb or tuber, the rule of thumb is for the depth of the hole to be 3X the diameter of the 'bulb' to the top of the 'bulb'. In other words, for a Daffodil that is 3" in diameter, the hole should be roughly 9" deep. For Crocus that are ¾" in diameter, a 3" hole is perfect.
- It is beneficial to plant several bulbs per hole to give a more mature appearance.
- If you have yet to try fall blooming *Colchicum*, give a few a try! It is too late to order them on line, but many garden centers carry them. They offer large flowers, upwards of 3" in diameter in shades of pink, purple and white. *Colchicum* x 'Waterlily' is an attractive double form (pictured at right) that usually blooms in mid-October into early November. I have never seen seedlings, although the clumps will produce offsets and increase in size. Plants are also very long lived, flowering for well over 30 years. The foliage is often coarse in the spring and goes dormant come June, so place them where the foliage will be partially obscured by other perennials.



#### Flowers

- October is likely to be the last chance to take and root cuttings of tender plants, such as Spurflower (*Plectranthus*), Coleus, and Geraniums. Other plants that are not of hybrid origin can be overwintered by collecting the seed and stored in the lettuce draw of the refrigerator. Various species of *Solanum*, *Asclepias*, *Nicotiana* and *Amaranthus* are ideal for overwintering in this manner. Remember, the average frost date is October 15<sup>th</sup>, although frosts appear to be coming later and later, so we may not receive a killing frost until early November.
- Remove the foliage of problematic perennials such as Bearded Iris and Peonies. The foliage serves as a location for the Iris Borer to lay their eggs and for Peonies,

the old foliage retains the spores for Powdery Mildew. It also helps to eliminate winter cover for mice, moles and voles!

- Remove annuals that appear tired or are frosted. They can be replaced with an attractive bed of pansies. During the winter, lightly mulch the pansies with straw or shredded leaves as they will make a great show come spring.
- Where possible or in more wild areas, leave the leaf litter behind, since it provides winter habitat for larvae of butterflies and moths, various egg masses, hibernating native bees, dormant spiders and many other beneficial insects!

- Prepare tuberous rooted plants for winter. Those such as Elephant Ears (*Alocasia* and *Colocasia*), *Dahlia*, *Canna*, and Banana (*Musa* and *Ensete*), which have a storage-type of root system can be dug, allowed to dry (as seen at right), cut back, wrapped in newspaper, and stored in a cool (50-55°F), dry basement. They can also be



potted into a container and kept on the drier side throughout the winter. You need not wait for a killing frost if you wish to dig them out after a light frost.

- For seed producing plants like the various species of *Rudbeckia* (Black-eyed Susan) and *Echinacea* (Purple Cone Flower), it is best to not cut the flower stems back until spring, since the seeds provide food for Gold Finches and other seed loving birds. Butterflies also seek shelter under flower heads during early fall. The Large Coneflower (*Rudbeckia maxima*) is a favorite seed source for many birds and is pictured at the end of the article.

- Ornamental Grasses are typically left standing for the winter interest, but the stems also provide a home for cavity nesting native bees, as do old raspberry canes and the dead wood of Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*). It pays to be a slightly sloppy gardener!

- Time to take care of your containers. Empty and clean any valuable containers to prevent damage from freeze-thaw cycles of winter. Wash clay containers inside and out to remove salts from fertilizers. For plastic and other weather resistant containers, add annuals that are more tolerant of frost for autumn color, such as Chrysanthemums, Salvias, Ornamental Cabbage, Kale or even Red Stemmed Willows (*Salix alba* 'Britzensis'), which can remain and provide



color throughout the winter (pictured above at right)!

### Turf

- Keep those lawn mower blades sharp! If the fallen leaves are not too thick, shred them weekly with the lawnmower and use them as mulch for your flowerbeds. They look great and benefit the soil too as they decompose. The finer pieces that remain behind actually help improve your turf when they filter to the bottom and break down.
- Early October is still a good time for over seeding bare spots in the lawn that were previously home to crabgrass or other annual weeds.

### Trees and Shrubs

- Plant deciduous trees and shrubs. This is actually an ideal time to plant woody plants, since the soil is still warm, allowing most species to produce roots well into December and better preparing them for the stress of next summer. Planting evergreens is okay through the middle of October, but it is best to wait until spring if planting goes much later. Evergreens continue to transpire water through the foliage during the winter and without an adequately developed root system, the foliage may dry out and scorch during the winter.
- This is a good time to think about the cold season to come and add some plants for late fall and winter interest. Our native Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*, pictured at right) provides cheery yellow flowers in November into December and our native Winterberry Holly (*Ilex verticillata* pictured below right) provides dazzling red fruits into February as well as food for overwintering birds. Both do best in full sun, although often found in dappled shade in the wild.
- Evaluate Oaks for Bacterial Leaf Scorch, which is easier to spot in the fall with the drier soils. If the leaves have turned brown in August and September, have an arborist evaluate the trees for spring treatments or removal.
- This has been a very dry year. Make certain all trees and shrubs planted this year receive a weekly watering should rainfall remain slight this month.



## Vegetables

- For the vegetable garden, it is time to finish harvesting potatoes and squash. Carrots, radish, chard, sun chokes, parsley and other cool season crops can be harvested as needed. Garlic should be planted by mid-October and mulched with salt hay or shredded leaves (as pictured at right). Areas of the garden that are bare can be mulched with compost, manure (fresh or composted) or seeded with winter rye, clover or other green cover crops. These cover crops can be turned into the soil early the following spring to provide additional and beneficial organic matter for the soil. Cover crops also improve soil life and nutrient levels, all key to producing great vegetables come next season!
- If you are interested in adding a low tunnel to your vegetable garden, seed out the cool season crops now, such as spinach, lettuce and kale and line out the hoops. As the temperatures begin to drop, cover the hoops with Agribon (a fabric material) and then with the advent of hard frosts cover with poly. This allows the crops to continue to grow throughout the winter months or until harvest!



Bruce Crawford

Manager of Horticulture, Morris County Parks Commission