

Gardening Notes for October

October marks the true start of autumn and much work for the gardener! It is now a race against time to complete our chores before that first heavy frost. September was a fairly dry month, so watering chores are certainly high on the list, especially for new plantings! 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 9-12" deep. For Crocus that are $\frac{3}{4}$ " in diameter, a 2-3" 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* or *Crocus*, give a few a try! It is too late to order them on line, but many garden centers carry them. *Colchicum* 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. The plants are also very long lived, flowering for well over 30 years as I can personally testify! 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. *Crocus speciosus* is pictured at right in mid-October. It seeds and naturalizes into a nice patch over 30 years. It too produces spring foliage, but is more grass-like and less obtrusive than *Colchicum*.



Flowers

- October is likely to be the last chance to take and root cuttings of tender plants, such as Spurflower (*Plectranthus*), Coleus, and Geraniums (*Pelargonium*). 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 15th, although this year seems to be running a little cooler than past years with temperatures in the 30's already in Warren County.

- Remove the foliage of problematic perennials such as Bearded Iris and Peonies as they begin to decline or drop to the ground. 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 or violas. 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, 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 not to 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 notes.
- 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 glazed or terra-cotta containers to prevent damage from freeze-thaw cycles of winter. Wash terra-cotta containers inside and out to remove salts from fertilizers. For plastic and other weather (frost) resistant containers add annuals that are more tolerant of the frost for autumn color. Such plants include 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). *Salix alba* 'Swizzle Stick' is great for its contorted red winter branches!



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 overseeding 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, yellow or orange fruits into February as well as food for overwintering birds. Remember, the hollies will need a pollinating male plant to go with the female. Both do best in full sun, although they are often found in dappled shade in the wild. Average to moist soils are ideal.



- Although this has been a rather moist year, make certain all trees and shrubs planted this year continue to receive a weekly watering should rainfall prove to be light this month.
- Evaluate Oaks for Bacterial Leaf Scorch, which is easier to spot in the fall. If the leaves have turned brown this summer, have an arborist evaluate the trees.
- Be on the lookout for Beech Leaf Disease, which is marked by darker splotches in the leaf. Again contact an arborist for some possible treatments.



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 seen at right). Areas of the garden that are unplanted 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 along with adding soil carbon, all key to producing great vegetables come next season!
- If you have planted peanuts, (pictured at right on Oct 22, 2016) they should be harvested the second or third week of October, depending on the frost.



They are still not fully ripened when harvested and the plants need to be hung in a garage or cool basement for several weeks for the nuts to ripen fully. It is best to hang them as a way of keeping the mice at bay! A lesson I learned from longtime gardening friends Ellen Simonetti and Bob Mellert.

- 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!



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