

Gardening Notes for October

October marks the true start of autumn and many busy weeks for the gardener! It is now a race against time to complete our chores before that first heavy frost. September was a fairly dry and cool month, providing little relief for watering chores! 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 plant or perennial should be added to enhance the autumn garden for next year!

Things to do:

Bulbs

- Finish ordering and start planting spring flowering bulbs as they arrive. 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', measured to the top of the 'bulb'. In other words, for a large 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" deep hole is perfect.
- In general, bulbs require well-drained soils and sun, although those bulbs that go dormant by late May can be planted under trees since it is going dormant as the tree is leafing out.
- It is beneficial to plant several bulbs per hole to give a more mature and impactful appearance.
- If you have yet to try fall blooming *Colchicum* or *Crocus*, give a few a try! It is probably too late to order them on line, but many garden centers carry them. *Colchicum* offers large flowers, upwards of 3" in diameter in shades of pink, purple and white. *Colchicum speciosum* 'Album' is an attractive white form (pictured above right) that usually blooms in September and has tidier foliage come spring. 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! Although 'Album' has more delicate foliage, the foliage of most selections is often coarse in the spring and goes awkwardly dormant come June (as pictured below right), so place them where other perennials will be partially obscure the foliage.
- *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 it is more grass-like and less



obtrusive than *Colchicum*. In fact, I have seen it planted in turf areas with great success. It also blooms longer than *Colchicums*, with flowers appearing from early October into November.

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 storing it in the lettuce draw of the refrigerator. Various species of *Solanum*, nonhardy *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 normal and it is not unusual to see temperatures in the 30's in Warren County come early October.
- Remove the foliage of problematic perennials such as Bearded Iris and Peonies as it begins to decline or drop to the ground. The Iris 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. Removing the foliage also helps to eliminate winter cover for mice, moles and voles that love to dine on the starch-rich roots of both plants!
- Remove annuals that appear tired or are frosted. They can be replaced with an attractive bed of cold hardy selections of pansies or violas. Ask your local garden center to bring in selections specifically bred for overwintering. Come winter, lightly mulch these pansies and violas with straw or shredded leaves as they will create 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 moths, hibernating native bees, dormant spiders and many other beneficial insects you will be looking for in your garden next year!

- 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 paper, and stored in a cool (50-55°F), dry basement. They can also be potted up and kept on the drier side throughout the winter in a cool basement or lightly heated garage. You need not wait for a killing frost if you wish to dig them earlier.



- 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 (pictured above).
- Ornamental Grasses are typically left standing for their 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 at times!
- By the same token, where appropriate allow some large broken limbs or stumps to remain in the garden, as they too can serve as homes for several native bee species.
- 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 at right). *Salix alba* 'Swizzle Stick' is also 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 (as pictured at right at Willowood Arboretum). 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 preparing them for the stress of next summer. Planting evergreens is fine through the middle of October, but it is best to wait until spring if thoughts of planting go much later. Evergreens continue to transpire water throughout the winter months and without an adequately developed root system, the foliage may dry out with portions of the tree turning brown. The plant may even die during a more severe winter.
- If the tree or shrub you purchased has been growing in a container and the roots are wrapping around the inside of the container, cut and tear apart these roots. Although the treatment seems harsh, this will encourage the roots to grow outward into the surrounding soil, preventing the development of a girdling root system. Such roots will wrap around the trunk of the plant and ultimately result in its decline and death, as seen in the image above.
- This is a good time to think about adding late fall color into your garden as it starts to transition into winter. Our native Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*, pictured above right) provides a cheery yellow mass of flowers in October into December. It is often



overlooked since it fails to have a strong sweet fragrance to the flowers and blooms when few folks are in garden centers. However, it provides a colorful display on arching vase-shaped stems up to 15' or greater in height. Our native Winterberry Holly (*Ilex verticillata* pictured above) provides dazzling red, yellow or orange fruits into February and March that is also food source for overwintering birds. Remember, the hollies will need a male plant to ensure pollination of the colorful females. Both plants perform best in full sun, although they are often found in dappled shade in the wild. Average to moist soils are ideal for Winterberry Hollies while Witch Hazels appreciate average moisture.

- Considering rainfall has been a lighter on average this year, make certain all trees and shrubs planted this year continue to receive a weekly watering should rainfall continue to be on the light side this month.
- Evaluate Oaks for Bacterial Leaf Scorch, which is easier to spot in the fall. If the leaves have turned brown in August/September, have an arborist evaluate the trees.
- Be on the lookout for Beech Leaf Disease, which is marked by dark splotches in the leaf. Again, contact an arborist for the most current 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. They can be harvested as needed, as there is no harm from frosts. Of course, if left too long, carrots and radishes will become too woody.
- Garlic should be planted by mid-October and mulched with salt hay or shredded leaves (as seen at right) for harvest next summer.
- 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 content for the soil. Cover crops also improve soil life and nutrient levels along with adding soil carbon, all key to producing great crops



come next season!

- If you have planted peanuts, (pictured above 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! This is 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 come the advent of hard frosts cover with poly. This allows the crops to continue to grow throughout the winter months or until harvest!
- A quote from a good gardening friend of mine, Ellen Simonetti “If you have sweet potatoes to harvest, you can start that. We pull and cut off the vines first, then lift what doesn't come up with them. Remember that the potatoes come out of the ground ‘green’. Before you use them, they need to age for two weeks. I put them on old sheets spread out on my basement floor as close to the furnace as is safe. Then I move them to another sheet in a convenient place and cover them by folding the sheet over them. There are still some down there from last year's harvest. Don't try to rub off the dirt. Their skins tend to be thin. Just shake the first sheet a little before you move them to their final home and dump the soil onto your lawn.”



As always, continue to visit your local garden center and think about where color in your garden is needed this month. Aside from the bulbs and woody plants mentioned above, there are a number of great plants to consider. If you like fragrance, consider Tea Holly (*Osmanthus heterophyllus* ‘Gulftide’). The plant loosely resembles an evergreen Holly, but has small flowers in October into November that are pungently fragrant. There are also a number of perennials that continue to bloom through the early frosts and into November. Pictured in the closing image is *Aster oblongifolius* ‘Raydon’s Favorite’, photographed on October 28th at Frelinghuysen Arboretum. As can be seen, there are still flower buds in the process of opening (those that are pink) and providing nectar for late season pollinators! If used in mass it also makes an attractive groundcover and displays respectable red fall color that usually lasts into December!



Also, don't forget that there are many 'bulbs' other than those mentioned, that bloom in October and November. *Crocus goulimyi* (pictured above) bears an attractive flower that blooms in mid to late October at Frelinghuysen Arboretum. Frost does not mean the garden is coming to a close as there is always something colorful right around the corner ready to provide color for the garden!



Bruce Crawford
Manager of Horticulture, Morris County Parks Commission