

This Month in the Garden

by Peggy Koppmann

It's been a long, hot, stressful summer for many gardeners as prolonged hot weather and lack of rainfall have left many gardens the worse for wear. As the calendar turns to September we can hope for cooler temperatures and much needed rain to carry us into the fall. Even at that, our gardens and landscapes continue to be a source of enjoyment and value to the greater ecosystem. We make a difference, whether we grow tomatoes or roses, milkweed, or petunias. We bring beauty and bounty to our families and our communities – and that's enough to keep us going.

A is for Allium – Ornamental alliums have become popular with home gardeners for their striking geometric blooms. Varieties include drumstick, corkscrew, Japanese, and nodding alliums, some growing from bulbs and others from rhizomes. Leaves fade off first, leaving the interesting and dramatic seedheads such as the 'Schubert allium (*Allium schubertii*) that looks like a fireworks explosion. Clumping alliums such as 'Millenium' have deep green leaves all season, culminating in long-lasting small blooms that attract a variety of tiny pollinators and insects. Late in the season, *A. thunbergii* 'Ozawa' is a nectar source for late fall pollinators.

Critical Thinking – September is a great time to begin a critical review of your garden's strengths and weaknesses. Do you have sections that need to be revamped? Do you need more shade plants or spring bulbs? What about more perennials for late season color or plants for pollinators or birds? It's helpful to have goals for your garden areas, so take a walk around – with a notepad! – and make some plans for fall renovations or spring plantings. While you're at it, think about trees and shrubs that would add structure, purpose, and beauty to your garden. Now, go do your research and start planning.

Morning Chores – Watering the garden in the morning is one of the gardener's essential chores. Temperatures are generally cooler, and plants have more time to absorb water before the heat of the day. Cooler temperatures also allow water to sink into the soil without evaporating too quickly. Water loss through transpiration is also lessened. Plants need water to conduct photosynthesis and to carry nutrients throughout the plant. Of course, the gardener's schedule also determines when watering occurs, so the next best time is late afternoon to early evening, giving time for evaporation off leaves to avoid fungal diseases.

Ancient History – Peonies have an ancient history dating back some 3900 years! Native to China and imported into Europe, Thomas Jefferson notes the European medicinal peony in his plans for the gardens at Monticello. Peonies rarely need dividing but you can move an existing plant or create a number of smaller plants in September so that they have at least 4 – 6 weeks of growing

time before hard frosts. Cut back the foliage when leaves begin to look ragged and look for the dormant buds (eyes). Use a clean, sharp knife to cut the roots into sections with at least three eyes. Move them to their new location and plant no more than 1 ½ to 2 inches below the soil surface. Large root divisions will produce bigger plants and flowers, rewarding you with beautiful blooms next year. Take good care of them and your peonies can last for 50 years!

Shrubs for Structure– The gardener's emphasis is often on annuals and perennials, but shrubs are an essential component of garden design. They provide structure and diversity as well as flowers, fruits, and autumn foliage. Many "maturing gardeners" make a gradual transition to shrubs to reduce the chores that come with a perennial garden. Be sure you know their mature size when choosing shrubs for your garden space. Consider native shrubs that, when established, require less watering and fertilizer and provide food and shelter for pollinators and birds. Check out <https://www.epicgardening.com/native-shrubs/> or <https://pallensmith.com/2014/12/01/10-north-american-native-shrubs/> for ideas for your garden.

The Tender Touch – Watch for a time later in the month to dig up tender plants such as dahlias, cannas, caladium, and gladiolus. The American Dahlia Society has an excellent resource on handling the tubers: dahlia.org/docsinfo/articles/digging-dividing-and-storing-tubers/. They recommend leaving tubers in the ground as long as possible to allow for maturation of the roots and the likelihood of success in storage; dahlias can tolerate a light frost. Sterilizing your tools between each plant removal reduces the chance of spreading any virus or disease. The article offers detailed instructions on lifting, dividing, and storing tubers that will be of interest to serious dahlia growers. Oh, yeah, follow the instructions on labeling your dahlia varieties. You'll be glad you did so in the spring.

And then ... Order garlic bulbs for October planting; harvest regularly; dig and divide daylilies; water new trees and shrubs regularly; remove water sprouts, suckers, dead or damaged wood in your trees but no hard pruning now; don't let your compost heap dry out; dispose of fallen fruit; visit a local farm and pick apples; repot houseplants that have been outside for the season as needed; prune rambling and climbing roses; keep weeding. Remember Fall doesn't begin until September 22, so be sure to savor the last days of summer. You've earned it!



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