

This Month in the Garden

by Peggy Koppmann

As the gardening season fades away, there is a kind of nostalgia for the beauty and bounty of our gardens. We clean up, put tools away, store pots and equipment. We reminisce about too much rain, or the heat, or deer, or rabbits, or..... But it's also a time to reflect on what we created. We planted for beauty, for pollinators, for exercise, for enjoyment, for satisfaction, for tomatoes. Gardening for us is not a hobby, it is a way of living in the natural world. As you wrap up the season, take some time to congratulate yourself on a job well done.

Hardneck or Softneck? – That's garlic we're talking about and hardneck is generally the choice in colder climates. October planting generally results in bigger and more flavorful bulbs. Garlic needs a long period of cold temperatures so fall planting gives cloves time to sprout and develop established roots. Choose a sunny spot in loose, fertile soil with good drainage. A variety of interesting possibilities exist including Great Lakes Hardneck, Elephant, Purple Glazer, and Krondasger Red. Seed catalogs carry lots of choices and local farmer's market vendors offer interesting varieties and lots of advice.

Winter Storage – Trying to keep perennials in pots over the winter can be challenging. Your odds are better if the plant is hardy to at least two zones colder than your zone. (Ex. In Zone 6, a perennial hardy to at least Zone 4 has the best chance for survival). The soil in the pot will not stay as warm as the soil in the ground and will be subject to freeze-thaw cycles. Some protection in a sheltered location right next to a house or shed is needed. Evergreen hedges and beneath evergreen trees are good choices and may offer some wind protection. Try for a north facing location to lessen sun exposure that might trigger thawing.

Cluster the pots together and cover them with straw, shredded leaves, or other organic material. Some gardeners have good success sinking pots into the ground before it freezes to take advantage of the stabilizing temperature of the ground soil. Make sure your container can withstand the winter; ceramic pots are more likely to crack in freeze/thaw cycles.

A Bird Buffet - We are often advised to leave seed heads of perennials for the birds during cold weather. Not every perennial has value for birds but here are a few that you can leave with confidence that the birds will thank you for it: Sunflower, Coneflower,

Milkweed, Bee Balm, Aster, Black-Eyed Susan, Goldenrod, Ironweed, Indian Grass, Joe Pye Weed, Switchgrass, Helianthus, Northern Sea Oats, and New England Aster. Sea Holly has thistle-like heads that attract goldfinches, tree sparrows, black-capped chickadees and goldenrod will feed finches, chickadees, Carolina wren, dark-eyed junco, and tufted titmouse. Think of your garden as a buffet line for the birds.

Fall Fruit Cleanup – Good sanitation practices in the home orchard are essential to reduce the amount of disease and fruit damage next year. Clean up dropped and mummified fruits, fallen leaves, or decaying wood and dispose or burn it. You can prune out dead or diseased wood but do not leave it on the ground. Winter moths lay their eggs in October – November on stems, barks or crevices in fruit trees and have the potential to cause significant crop damage. Sticky traps or grease bands applied properly can be used to mitigate damage. For the home fruit grower, Cornell's excellent publication is a must: <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/60165302-b299-433a-952d-9ac82cc63849/content>

Winter Watering – The stress of our hot, dry summer is bound to affect our trees and shrubs. A lack of water going into winter can damage root systems further. Keep watering on a regular schedule until the ground begins to freeze. Water is actually an insulator to trees and soil. Soil that stays moist will be warmer and plants holding water in their cells are less susceptible to damage from cold weather. Fall watering should be done only when temperatures are above 40 degrees F. Water early in the day so plants have time to absorb it before nighttime temperatures drop. Water slowly and deeply and be sure to water all the way out to the edge of the root zone. Some sources recommend not watering in the fall until trees drop their leaves. Take a look at this article for further thought on watering: <https://www.thespruce.com/when-should-i-be-watering-trees-in-fall-2130936>

And then..... Plant spring flowering bulbs; drain hoses for storage; install a bubbler in your birdbath for the winter; finish dividing and potting perennials; save seeds from non-hybrid plants; make notes about your vegetable varieties - their taste, performance, and yield; harvest the last of your warm season vegetables; bring in the last of your indoor plants; take a ride in the country and buy your apples and pumpkins from an actual farm or grower, not the big box store; Buy local!



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