

This Month in the Garden

by Peggy Koppmann

Writing this on an 80° F. October day, it's hard to know what November will bring for gardeners. My wish is for one of those glorious Indian Summer periods, with clear skies, sunny days, and cool nights. Or then we'll be having hard frosts or even snowfall. Either way, gardeners have earned every bit of time to relax and put aside garden chores. Unless it's mild enough, then you should go weed!

Frost Facts – A light frost generally affects plant surfaces and may not cause lasting damage. But a hard frost (below 28°F) causes the water inside plant cells to freeze and expand. The cell walls rupture, and the cell tissue dies. Frost-bitten plants can also look wilted as their ability to retain water has been compromised, leading to dehydration, discoloration, and “mushy” leaves. But in the case of vegetables such as kale, spinach, cabbage, and root crops like carrots, parsnips, turnips, and radishes, frost helps bring out sweeter flavors. It seems that the starches in those plants are converted to sugars in cold temperatures. Since sugars freeze at lower temperatures than starches, those vegetables may survive and indeed benefit from frosty nights. Leeks, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, and cauliflower also convert to sweeter temperatures with frost.

Loubser's Legacy – Dutch horticulturist, P.J. Loubser, was the first to hybridize Amaryllis in 1799. Native to South America, they are thought to have been discovered in 1768 and named after a character in Greek mythology, Amaryllis, who was known for her beauty. Now a popular indoor grown plant, they are a sure way to brighten a winter day. They can be planted in soil; the top third of the bulb should protrude above the soil line. Or grow them in a vase atop a base of pebbles with the water just reaching the base of the bulb. It may take 6-12 weeks until they flower, and they will need staking to support the top-heavy stems. Although Amaryllis are often sold in supermarkets and big box stores, be daring and check out the bulb catalogs for more exotic varieties such as ‘Double Dragon,’ ‘Orange Sovereign,’ or ‘Charisma.’

So, You Want to Plant a Meadow – In their eagerness to attract and support pollinator species, some folks are looking for “wildflower” seed mixes to sow late in the season to allow for stratification. If only it were that easy. Starting a meadow area is no small task and requires planning, preparation, and, importantly, choosing the right seed mixture for your area. Purchase only seed mixtures that list the botanical names so that you can research if the plants listed are native to our area, appropriate to our zone, are considered aggressive or invasive, and actually support specialist as well as generalist insect species. Here are a couple of sites to begin your research:

<https://reconnectingecosystems.substack.com/p/good-intentions-harmful-impacts-the>; or

<https://gracefulgardens.com/wildflower-garden-mistakes/>

Continuing Containers - Now that you have pulled out the summer annuals, it's time to consider some color for the cooler season. Those perky little pansies, some sweet alyssum, paired with the variety of colors of ornamental kale and cabbage keep your green thumb going even as the season wanes. Just for fun, look for dinosaur kale, or Redbon for its maroon and purple hues, or Peacock White. Dwarf conifers are a wonderful addition to fall containers, and you can find a home for them in next year's garden.

Watch the Window- There is a short window for mulching in the late fall season. Too soon, and you give rodents a snug hiding place to spend the winter. Too late, and you risk not being able to mulch because of accumulating snow. Snow cover is often problematic in our region, so your timing will make a difference for newly planted, weak, or less-hardy perennials. Some plants should not be mulched, including Delphiniums, Heuchera, and Sedums, where crown rot can be a problem. You can also leave mulch off Penstemon, lavender, Hosta, purple coneflower, and bearded iris.

Preserving Your Tools – Many of us have gardening tools that have been handed down and are superior to some modern (weak, easily breakable) tools. Or maybe you have purchased quality tools. Either way, taking care of your tools is a good investment, so start by cleaning them of dirt and debris. Research methods to clean any rust and then wipe thoroughly to prevent any moisture accumulation. Sharpen blades and lubricate to protect them. Wipe wooden handles with linseed oil to seal the wood grain. Store your tools inside a garage or tool shed. Now, they are ready for the next gardening season.

And then.....Reduce or eliminate indoor plant feeding; install rabbit and rodent guards for trees and shrubs; keep rose leaves and other potentially diseased leaves out of your leaf mold; raise containers off the ground; provide water for the birds; give houseplants as much light as possible; take your last chance to divide rhubarb plants; take hardwood cuttings; keep watering; finish removing mummified fruit; watch for sun scald on newly planted trees; make mulled cider, put your feet up, and relax.



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