This Month in the Garden

by Peggy Koppmann

October is the month of last chances. This month may be your last chance to plant trees or shrubs or bare-root roses. It's the last chance to sow grass seed, to divide spring and summer blooming perennials, and to plant garlic. To complicate things further, our traditionally mild Octobers may surprise us with colder weather that limits our work time in the garden. Hence the month can feel like a long list of "gotta get it done now" chores. Even so, gardeners get to enjoy every beautiful fall day in the garden to keep our last chances from being lost chances.

It's Not Easy Being Green – Mild October weather can mean some tomatoes are still hanging on in the garden. Pick the ones that are mostly green but show a little bit of color change, wash them to remove dirt, pop off any stems and dry them. (Only use ones that have no imperfections and compost the others.) Place the tomatoes in a brown paper bag and fold over the top to close it. Some sources recommend adding an apple or banana to the bag to produce the ethylene gas that promotes ripening. Either way, check the bag daily and remove any ripened fruit. For a deep dive into growing tomatoes and understanding the ripening process: https://awaytogarden.com/ripening-tomatoes-and-saving-seed-with-craig-lehoullier/; https://sowrightseeds.com/blogs/planters-library/when-to-pick-tomatoes-breaker-stage

Love Me Tender – Cannas, dahlias, and gladioli (or gladioluses if you prefer), are referred to as tender bulbs, not likely to survive in our winter gardens. Wait till after the first frost to carefully dig them up. Shake off any loose dirt. Find a warm, well-ventilated spot to store them for a couple of days. Discard any that have signs of disease or decay or are shriveled and cut off any remaining foliage. Net bags or burlap sacks provide ventilation for storage in a loose medium such as peat moss, sawdust, or even newspapers. Find a cool dry spot in the garage or basement and check regularly during the winter and discard any that begin to decay (In a side note, there are about 274 different variations of this process, by my modest estimate). So, check out some additional sources and ensure the survival of your tenderlings: https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/good-growing/2025-10-24-tips-overwintering-tender-bulbs; https://www.burpee.com/blogs/ornamental-gardening/how-to-store-tender-bulbs-over-the-winter

Bathing Beauties – Those houseplants that were outside all summer need a bath before taking up residence in the house. The leaves get cleaned of dust, debris, pollen, and any sticky residues and you have a chance to check for any hitchhiking insects that might want to winter over in your home; think spider mites, aphids, mealybugs, scale, insect eggs. Give everything deep watering and expect some leaf drop as they adjust to life indoors. Stop fertilizing now unless your plants are under grow lights and continue to show new leaves during the winter. Some gardeners adhere to the "once weekly, weakly" philosophy but this is warranted only if the plant is showing new growth.

Long Live the Squash- Curing winter, Hubbard, and butternut squash helps harden the skin and heal cuts and scratches on the surface. The process calls for temperatures of 75-85 degrees F and relative humidity of 80 – 85% for two to three weeks immediately after harvest, but not in direct sunlight. After curing, store them in a cool, dry, well-ventilated place at 55-60 degrees F. and high humidity. Don't store them near apples or pears or other fruits which release ethylene gas and will shorten their storage life. Do not cure acorn squash. It already has thin skin and requires no curing! The heat and humidity of the curing process reduce its flavor and shorten the storage life of acorn squash. Further info at: https://www.bloomingexpert.com/tips/vegetables/winter-squash/curing-storing/

Christmas is Coming – If you have a true Christmas cactus that has been outside and the nighttime temperatures have dropped consistently below 50 degrees F it's time to bring it in – to the dark. Native to the Brazilian Atlantic coastal forest, it is a short-day or long-night plant requiring long nights of 12 – 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness to trigger a protein that causes the plant to enter a stage that results in bud formation. This period should run for 6–8 weeks with no light pollution by dim light, the glow of a TV, or even a streetlight. Some gardeners will move plants into a cool, unused room to ensure consistent darkness at night.

Reduce watering and do not fertilize Once buds appear the plant can be carefully moved into bright, indirect light. Take proper care of your Schlumbergera spp. and it will reward you with spectacular blooms. https://ourwildgarden.com/when-do-you-bring-a-christmas-cactus-inside/

And then… Harvest and preserve herbs; keep watering as necessary; WEED; fertilize deciduous shrubs after they lose their leaves; keep lawns clear of leaves; raise the height of your mower; clean birdbaths and feeders; WEED; plant a tree; plant one for someone else; clean up the last of the annuals; prepare new planting beds; plant spring flowering bulbs; start your seed order lists for next year; soak up every bit of the color and sunshine in this waning season.

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