



It's Time for Fall Garden Tasks

by Marilyn Loser

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My garden and the weather are telling me that it's fall. What a long, beautiful and warm fall we've had! We even had a record high of 77 degrees F on October 13.

I've put my remaining flower pots in our outdoor greenhouse. The greenhouse is only heated by the sun and not well insulated so I'll have to decide which pots will migrate to our small indoor greenhouse for the winter. I try to avoid bringing in insects. Sadly, I've found basil harbors aphids, so I'll harvest it and freeze in olive oil for pesto.

Most of our garden flowers have stopped blooming (a few California and Shirley poppies, pansies, cosmos daisies and Johnny-jump-ups are still around) so it's time for fall garden tasks. Our green ash tree has dropped most of its golden leaves and they are scattered all over the lawn, sidewalk, gravel, and flower beds. I'll scoop them up with a pair of large, plastic helping hands that my sister-in-law Patty gave me and place them under shrubs and on top of perennial beds.

Since we're in a windy area, I've learned to trim perennial stalks to 4-5 inches so they hold the leaf mulch better. I'll cover some beds with wire fencing to help keep the leaves where I want them. While a light covering of leaves might protect your lawn from winter sun and drying, a heavy layer could mat the lawn and smother it.

I planted a number of new perennials last spring. I don't know if they will poke out of the ground in early or late spring so I'll mark them with small flags so I don't try to stick new plants in their spots next spring. Oh yes, a lesson learned from previous mistakes!

Birds love sunflower seeds and since all of mine had small blooms this year, the birds were able to perch on the seed heads and clean out the seeds. I'll be cutting down the dried stalks and use them for mulch.

"Organic Gardening" magazine suggests leaving some hiding spots in your yard. It says, "Beneficial insects like spiders, solitary bees, ladybugs, and some beetles rely on logs, brush piles, or dead groundcover to overwinter in." Don't know if any of these can over winter in our climate. However, I have lots of ground cover and a number of low shrubs that hold most of their leaves over the winter so our yard should provide some good hiding places.

As I cut back dried foliage and pull weeds (yep, they are still around), I try to loosen the soil and add good quality soil conditioner. I mix the conditioner in the top layer of the soil with the plant clippings and water in the hope that the nutrients will remain in the soil and not just blow away.

I'm considering doing some fall perennial-bed fertilizing. Fall fertilizer is different from most spring fertilizers. Fertilizers list the amounts of nitrogen (N), Phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). Phosphorus stimulates root

growth in plants, so that's what you want in the fall to promote beautiful spring plants. "This Old House" recommends 0(N)-20(P)-0(N).

Please note I'm talking about perennial-flower beds, not lawns. Robert Cox, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Agent, writes about "The Myth of 'Winterizer' Fertilizer" for lawns. He states studies that advocate 8-18-22 fertilizer were conducted on warm-season grasses, not those appropriate for our climate.

Once we have some hardening frosts, I will sprinkle various flower seeds around the garden and mix in by hand, with a rake, or the bottom of my shoe. These seeds will germinate (or not) when the time is right. I'll talk about these flowers in a future column.

An interesting factoid: According to the Rodale Organic Life website, radishes can attract, and then kill off, harmful pests. For example, the plants attract nuisance wireworms, but as the plants decompose in the spring they release cyanide compounds that will kill off the worms.

"Is not this a true autumn day? Just the still melancholy that I love — that makes life and nature harmonize. The birds are consulting about their migrations, the trees are putting on the hectic or the pallid hues of decay, and begin to strew the ground, that one's very footsteps may not disturb the repose of earth and air, while they give us a scent that is a perfect anodyne to the restless spirit. Delicious autumn! My very soul is wedded to it, and if I were a bird I would fly about the earth seeking the successive autumns." George Eliot, letter to Miss Lewis, 1st October 1841