



October - November - December 2020

Vol. 15, No. 4

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Yes, by anybody's standards, it was a difficult summer! Prolonged heat, humidity, drought, violent wind storms ... it's never easy being a Connecticut gardener! But the gardening year is a circle and each season brings something to be treasured. The sunny, still days and cooler nights of early autumn are a special gift as we wait for the flaming colors of fall to light our way to the winter to come. After all, people arrive from all over the world to admire the fiery beauty we take for granted.

We are living through difficult and complicated times and many of us have found great comfort in our gardens this year. New England gardeners learn to go with the flow. Our ground stays warm until almost Thanksgiving and the temperature cool-down is gradual. Sunny days and cooler nights keep the dew on the grass well into the morning and make gardening a pleasure. Indian Summer traditionally only occurs when warm days come after a killing frost ... and that occurs anywhere from mid-October to mid-November. It's Mother Nature's last gift to us before we bed down for the winter.

As the gardening days begin to wind down, there is something very comforting about repeating the annual ritual of putting the garden to bed. It takes place over many weeks and allows us to savor these last golden days and to take our time over the chores. Finishing the season and tucking your garden in for the winter takes a little planning ... but leaving your garden neat and tidy will pay huge dividends in the spring.

Many perennials really go dormant on their own schedule and your main role is to tidy up, cutting things back in late October and November. Do not cut back plants too early as it could produce a sudden spurt of new growth. Wait until the plant's leaves are yellow or brown and, as long as no disease is present, remove everything to the compost pile, layering in some fallen leaves. It is actually easier to remove the leaves on Daylilies in the spring when only a gentle tug will be needed but you can take away their dead leaves in the fall. Snow is still the best insulator around so don't worry if you leave some plants standing.

It's also a good time to reflect on the garden year now ending. What went well, what didn't? What new plants would you like to try? What plants no longer fit in? Are some of your flowering bushes over-grown? Does your basic garden plan still work for your current life style? Nature never sits still and our gardens change too. Fall is the perfect time to adapt the garden to a new design that better suits the way you choose to garden now.

A general guide, **Putting Your Garden to Bed for the Winter**, is available on the web site.

Upcoming Workshops and Events

Covid-19 has impacted so many activities and changed so many lives but we are truly thankful that gardening has brought both solace and pleasure to so many of our friends and customers over these long months. Acer Gardens' primary concern is always the safety and well-being of our customers and staff. We have therefore decided that, sadly, we will not run any of our customary workshops during this last quarter of the year. This was a difficult decision to make because we look forward to and enjoy these events as much as you do! The Hartford, CT Flower Show has been officially cancelled for this coming year so we won't see each other there this spring. Hopefully, the New Year will bring us all good news and life will slowly return to normal but until that time we must adapt to the new situation as best we can. We ask for your forbearance and understanding as we face these difficult times together and plan accordingly.

Plan Ahead for the Holidays

Holiday Flowers, Wreaths and Containers

Wreaths, containers, bows, arrangements, mixed greens and assorted decorations (all weather-proof) will be available at the nursery starting the week before Thanksgiving and can be pre-ordered through the on-line store for pick-up at the nursery. Some pre-decorated wreaths and table arrangements can also be chosen and pre-ordered. Gift certificates are available at the nursery and on our on-line store but we have many other Holiday gift options available.

Specialty poinsettias in unusual colors and shapes are real attention getters. Amaryllis are planted (in different stages of development) and ready to go. Consult with us well in advance if you have something special in mind ... there's a wealth of dried material and decoration available to truly personalize your gift. We love to work with you to bring that holiday glow to your home and to make your presents really special!

Christmas Trees

Fresh-cut only a few days before Thanksgiving, Douglas and Fraser Fir Christmas trees will be available at the nursery. They can be pre-ordered on the on-line store; delivery is available, for a fee. It's definitely a good idea to place your order early.

The Plant of the Month

The plant of the Month is available at the nursery from the first of each month on. These plants are carefully chosen to showcase current bloom and are featured at the nursery from April through October.

October: Ornamental Grasses

Zone: 5-9 Height: 1 – 5' Spread: 1 ½-4'

As a group, ornamental grasses grow in graceful fountain shapes; many produce bottlebrush plumes and colorful foliage and all sway in the slightest breeze. They thrive in sun, heat and humidity, appear to handle New England winters well, are usually free of insect and disease problems and require very little maintenance. Useful as specimen plants, they are also impressive planted en masse and combine well with the last of the autumn perennials. They provide 12-month landscape interest, a safe winter home for birds and a focal point in your winter landscape.

The Really-Must-Do-Now List

Leave grass clippings on the lawn to decompose. Re-seed areas as needed. Around the second or third week in November apply fertilizer.

Don't fertilize or prune roses now --- wait until spring. Tie back any long climbing rose canes to prevent wind whip. Hill up the soil and mulch around the base of Hybrid Teas before the ground freezes. Rugosas are very hardy and need no attention other than trimming back exceptionally long canes which might be damaged during the winter.

The bees will continue to pollinate late-blooming perennials, Buddleias are particular favorites.

Do your transplanting and moving now in order to give plant material time to settle in. Keep the new transplants well watered throughout the rest of the growing season and make sure your transplants are mulched going into the winter.

Let ornamental grasses stay in place. They suit our winter landscape and also act as a bird refuge. Wait until early spring to cut down and divide grasses.

Do not plant Delphiniums, Foxglove or Hollyhocks in the fall ... they must be planted in the spring in order to thrive.

New trees and bushes can be planted in the fall but established trees and shrubs should only be transplanted in the spring. Don't prune your Rhododendrons and Hydrangeas now ... they set next year's flowers right after they bloom and you could lose next spring's blossom.

If you are mulching new plantings, use Double Ground hard and soft bark mulch. It carries no diseases or insects and breaks down nicely, adding organic material to the soil over time. Always available in bulk at the nursery, the mulch should be applied 1-2" deep and kept a few inches away from the stems or trunks of your plant material.

Start to apply deer repellents now. Creatures of habit, deer quickly get used to certain scents and are lazy about changing established routes so it's a good idea to change repellents often.

Seasonal Reminders

Keep weeding and dead-heading. Many Connecticut weeds routinely live through the winter!

Early October is your last chance to take cuttings from Coleus and Begonias, root them in water and plant them up. They make quick, easy house plants and will give you indoor color all winter long. Do not be surprised if your red Coleus becomes variegated during the course of the winter ... when planted out in the spring, it will quickly revert to its original color. Your rooted and potted Coleus plants can be planted back outside next spring at the same time you plant your annuals!

These plants/bushes should not be cut back until spring:

Artemisia	Caryopteris	Lavender
Bergenia	Dianthus	Lirope
Buddleia	Euphorbia	Montauk Daisies
Campanula	Hellebore	Perovskia
Carex	Heuchera	Stachys

Edge the perennial beds so that the garden has a neat appearance going into the winter.

Remember to store Wilt-Stop, insecticides, fungicides and other “goosey” products in the laundry room or a frost-free cellar. Granular fertilizer and seeds can be safely stored in the garage.

Asters

If late-blooming Dahlias are considered one of the glories of the fall garden, Asters are the glue that holds everything together.

Available in an incredible range of colors, Asters bring zest to a fall garden. Their long period of bloom (late summer through fall) and wide height range makes them invaluable in a mixed bed. Mingling well with other fall perennials, Asters establish themselves easily, thrive in average soil and will take sun to partial shade. Some bloom in clouds of pale flowers; others flaunt deep shades of purple. All combine well with native plants and will reward you with steady growth. (Cutting the plants back in early June will prevent “Aster sprawl”.) Cut Asters back after the foliage has died. Divide every 3-5 years (in early spring) to keep the plants under control; remove unwanted seedlings as you spot them.

Sedums

Sedums, also known as Stonecrop, come in many different varieties and sizes, blooming across many months and adding a zing of color to the late garden. They are perfect for New England: Cold hardy, easy to care for and a great favorite of our native pollinators. Basically, Sedum comes in low-growing or upright forms. Some Sedums spread along the ground, thriving in rock gardens; others form tall, upright clumps, blooming late in the season with flowers lasting 4 weeks or more. Most do best in full sun in well-draining soil. Once established, Sedums require little care. Water sparingly if needed and cut back the plants to maintain their shape after bloom. Many gardeners leave the flowers alone to form attractive seed heads.

Sedum Sunsparkler ‘Firecracker’ is a perfect drought-proof groundcover, growing to a height of only 6” with cherry-red leaves from early spring to the killing frost in the fall. Sedum ‘Neon’, with purple-pink flowers, reaches 20” and blooms from mid-summer to mid-fall. Beloved of our native pollinators, it can handle containers, small spaces and even mass plantings. For bloom from August into November, look no further than that old stand-by “Autumn Joy”. Pink flowers mature into copper, combine well with ornamental grasses and deliver showy seed heads.

Fall Planting

Fall planting is a great time to get a jump on the next season and to plan for fuller and longer bloom periods in the garden ... it is the perfect time to plant or transplant most perennials and shrubs. The combination of warm soil and reasonably dependable rain leads to good root growth and will give your new plantings a strong head start. In fact, fall planted perennials develop larger, better-established root systems and start to make quicker growth in the spring. Plants with the head start of fall planting appear to adapt better to summer heat. If you are adding to established perennial beds, remember that the “spread” dimension means that the plant will fill in space North to South as well as East to West! Give those new plants plenty of room to grow!

The nice thing about fall planting is that it takes place over a longer period of time, without the frenzy and urgency of spring planting. How do you know when to start? Of course, it depends on what you’re planting (perennials first, bulbs last, trees and bushes in-between) but nature provides subtle signs. Some gardeners wait for nighttime temperatures to get down around 50°. Others wait for the hummingbirds and crickets to leave and the squirrels to start hoarding acorns or for the foliage to take center stage.

Fall planting time is definitely here the first time you smell wood smoke or notice reddening rose hips you missed when you deadheaded the climbers. It's a wonderful time in the gardener's year!

As you look at your perennial beds now, you can identify current "gaps" and add something to extend the season. The nursery has many fall-blooming perennials available such as Japanese Anemones, Sedum, Boltonia, Cimicifuga, Dendranthema, Asters, Eupatorium, Liriope, Vernonia, Kirengeshoma and ornamental Grasses. The fall is also a good time to consider adding a few native plants. Many natives have an "open" look to their growth habit which blends particularly well with the perennials currently in bloom and their sun/shade requirements are very adaptable. Think about adding New England Aster, purple Coneflower, Cardinal Flower, Bee Balm, Tradescantia or Persicaria. Come to the nursery or check the on-line store to see how full the plant tables are with fall-bloomers!

All early-spring blooming perennials should be planted in the fall including Phlox subulata (Creeping Phlox), Iberis (Candytuft), Hellebore (Lenten Rose), Primulas and Pulmonaria.

Priscilla's Spring Favorites

Priscilla, like all of us, looks forward to the beauty of the Spring show, enjoys many different kinds of spring flowers and likes to plan for a succession of color and shape. She suggests working these bulbs into your own show, starting with early Spring in the house:

Amaryllis

The larger bulbs are easy to plant (some can be grown in glass and pebbles) and their slow growth is fun to watch. Although it takes 8-12 weeks at least to bloom, sometimes longer, the flowers are exciting. Many new shapes and color blends have been introduced other than the ones so familiar to us all. The Amaryllis bloom can actually be cut for display and is most impressive in an arrangement. And what a bonus: after a summer outdoors, Amaryllis, with a little care, will bloom again, often year after year.

Camassia leichlinii (Caerulea Group)

Best grown in well-drained soil in full sun to part shade, Camassia produces tall, feathery lavender-blue star-shaped flowers in mid-spring. It needs regular moisture during its growth and bloom period but will tolerate drier conditions as it heads to dormancy. Leave the plants undisturbed and they will form colonies and bloom for years. Makes a beautiful cut flower.

Leucojum aestivum (Summer Snowflake)

At its showiest planted in groups of 15 or more, this tall (1-1.5') flower blooms in mid-spring, producing lovely white bell-shaped flowers reminiscent of snowdrops, and then goes dormant. It naturalizes well, especially if mulched in the summer. Very useful under trees or shrubs, this bulb takes full sun to part shade and is best left undisturbed.

Allium schubertii

Need a blooming member of the onion family that looks like a firecracker? This bulb is for you! 1-2' high rose-purple flowers bloom May to June. This bulb performs best in dry, sunny areas of the garden and established plantings have good drought tolerance. Seed heads dry after bloom and can be picked for flower arrangements. Adored by pollinators and deer resistant.

Fall is the Time to Plant a Special Tree

Have you ever been envious of the colorful foliage you see as you drive around in the fall? So much of our New England foliage is borrowed from the general landscape. Fall is the perfect time to plant a tree with the color of foliage you like and place it in your landscape where it will show to its greatest advantage. Some trees producing brilliant foliage and/or berries include:

Amelanchier canadensis (Shadblow or Serviceberry)

Zone: 4 – 7 H: 25-30' Full sun to part shade

The showy white flowers so apparent April to May give way to purple-black berries in early summer and are followed by flaming orange-red leaves in autumn. Over 40 birds and several mammals are very attracted to this understory tree's berries. Shadblow is at its best in native plant gardens which allow its fall color to show to advantage.

Cornus alternifolia (Pagoda Dogwood)

Zone: 3-7 H: 15-25' Full sun to part shade

This small tree is an excellent choice for the four season garden. Its unique horizontal branching habit makes it interesting to look at, even in winter. White spring flowers give way to blue-black berries and leaves turn a beautiful burgundy red in the fall. Birds and butterflies are very fond of this tree which provides them with good resting spots.

Acer griseum (Paperbark Maple)

Zone: 4-8 H: 20-30' Full sun to part shade

Easily grown, this small, oval tree is noted for its peeling, copper- orange, red-brown bark and its late fall season reddish-orange foliage. Summer leaves contrast the dark green of the top with a silvery green on the bottom. This tree is an ideal landscape focal point.

Acer rubrum (Red Maple)

Zone: 3-9 H: 40-70' Full sun to part shade

Everything about this tree is red! Red flowers appear in April, new leaves are red-tinged, fall color is deep red or yellow, and green stems turn red in the winter. Fast growing, the red maple is an excellent shade tree and will tolerate wet soil conditions

Acer saccharum (Sugar Maple)

Zone: 3-8 H: 30-60' Full sun to part shade

One of the best of the larger shade trees, it's hard to beat the sugar maple's brilliant red, yellow and orange fall foliage. Honey bees are particularly fond of this tree; pancake eaters are fond of its syrup!

Dividing in the Fall

Fall is the ideal time to divide those perennials which tend to form large clumps. The soil is warm and the new divisions will have time to form a strong root system before winter. Water the new plants well as we head into winter.

Daylilies

Daylilies are adaptable and tough, requiring very little on-going maintenance and care but they will produce their best blooms if they are routinely divided every 3-5 years. Division is good for the plants and an easy way to expand your plantings.

Use a garden fork to lift the clump from the ground. Start by inserting the fork into the ground 6-12" away from the base of the plant. Push down on the handle and pry the clump up and out of the soil. Work your way around the plant, doing this, until the clump is free. Lift the clump from the hole and lay it on the ground or on a tarp. Pull the clump apart, discarding the center. You should have at least 2 distinct clumps remaining. A really large clump can be divided and then re-divided if necessary. Replant the divisions and keep well watered until the new daylilies settle in.

Hostas

Hostas can be divided in the spring or fall and there is no particular advantage to which you choose. It is helpful to pick a time when the weather is cool and moist and in a year of drought that is not easy!

With a sharp spade, cut around the outside of the Hosta clump. Disturbing the roots as little as possible, pry and lift the entire clump out of the ground. With the spade, hack off smaller chunks, no smaller than 5" in diameter. Replant the divisions at the same depth as the original clump was growing. Water well, but do not fertilize. Mulch lightly.

Bearded Iris

Bearded Iris should be divided every 2-3 years to keep them blooming freely and to reduce the incidence of disease. Dig all around the plant and gently lift it out and shake off the loose soil. Cut the foliage to 6" to help prevent water loss. Inspect the plant for iris borers and remove any trace of disease. Separate the individual rhizomes ... don't break them apart but make clean cuts to divide the plant into new sections.

In a full sun location, dig shallow holes for the new plants and make a 2-3" mound of dirt in the center. Place the rhizomes in the hole, spreading the roots down the mound of dirt, cover with soil and firm the dirt. Water well weekly until the new plant is established and making new leaves.

Often-Asked Questions

When should my houseplants come inside for the winter?

By the middle of October, before a killing frost ... or even earlier, your houseplants should all be back in the house after their summer outdoors. Inspect the plants carefully before you bring them in and treat for any bugs or pests. Cut back or prune the plant if necessary and re-pot with fresh soil. Available at the nursery, Acer Gardens' bagged Alpine Soil Mix is ideal for potting house plants as it promotes good drainage. Grouping plants together is an easy way to generate humidity (especially if all the plants are on a water-filled humidity tray) and to showcase diverse foliage and plant forms. Fertilize the houseplants lightly every 2 weeks.

What's the best way to store my tender tubers and bulbs for the winter?

After a frost, cut off the leaves and dig up Dahlias, Gladioli, Cannas, Caladiums, Colocasia (Elephant Ears) and Acidanthera. Do not wait for these tubers/bulbs to freeze before you dig them up. Clean off the soil (do not wash) and store the roots on their side in vermiculite or the cedar shavings used at the bottom of gerbil cages. They do well stored in boxes in the basement, protected from temperature extremes and dampness. Label by type and color. If mice routinely get into your cellar, ask your supermarket produce manager for an empty fine-meshed red onion bag. Line the bag with several layers of newspaper, add the cedar chips and layer the bulbs/tubers in. Pull the bag closed, label by type and color, and hang high on a hook in the cellar.

When do I plant my garlic?

Plant both hardneck and softneck garlic after a hard frost. Pick a new area in the vegetable garden with fertile, well-drained soil. Take the garlic cloves apart and plant 4-6" apart 1 ½-2" deep. Mulch lightly with straw. The garlic will start to grow now. In the spring, you will see more growth and the bud will form scapes. Cut that stalk off ... it's delicious sautéed. After the foliage yellows and browns in midsummer you can start to harvest and dry the garlic. Store the garlic in bunches in a cool location. The nursery has 5 different kinds of garlic bulbs available ... all will do well in this climate.

I love the idea of a fall garden but I don't have much room available ... how can I get "the look" without giving up too much space?

The easiest way to get a big fall impact in limited space is to focus your autumn plantings in one area ... a garden entrance is ideal. It should be visible, if possible, from the house so that you can enjoy the seasonal change too! Ornamental grasses are often used as the backbone of fall gardens. They are at their showiest in fall and their presence is striking. Leave the grasses standing all through the winter for the birds to enjoy. Round, flat flowers will contrast nicely with the grasses: Sedums, Anemones and Heucherella are ideal and the color choice is huge.

How can I lure returning bees to my garden ... what are good bulb choices to plant now for the spring?

We know how much we need bees as pollinators ... but don't forget how much bees need us! Early blooming spring bulbs provide the nectar and pollen the arriving bees need. They're really hungry when they get here! It's their first fresh food after a long winter and only food around before other native nectar sources become available. Bees will actually roll in pollen in early spring ... some will even sleep inside the flowers. You can easily attract them by providing flowering bulbs in blue, purple, white and yellow. Plant them in abundance for the greatest effect. The best bulbs for bees include:

Allium	Crocus	Hyacinthoides
Eranthis	Muscari	Tulips
Camassia	Fritillaria	Scilla
	Galanthus	

All these bulbs are available now at Acer Gardens in The Garden Shed and planting can begin right now ... you could have blooms from late March to early May if you plan carefully and the bees will thank you by staying and working in your garden all summer long.

With the drought in control, we've been watering like mad all summer ... when can I stop?

Plants work on making flowers and leaves all summer long. In the fall, while the soil is still warm, they start concentrating on extending their root systems to get through the winter. After a dry summer, they need water ... 2-3 times a week. You can begin to decrease watering frequency when more dependable fall rains start.

Transplants, division and newly planted perennials should be watered up to the first significant killing frost. Newly planted trees and bushes should be on a regular watering schedule until the ground freezes.

With winter coming, can I use leaves for mulch?

Leaves make excellent winter mulch, giving many benefits: water retention, soil temperature assistance, erosion control, weed suppression and the addition of organic material to the soil. The most versatile leaf mulch is obtained by running them over with the lawn mower. This will speed up decomposition and help water move through the mulch. Spread the mulch no more than 3" thick and let nature take its course.

Can I safely cut evergreen branches for Christmas decorations?

Yes, but keep a few considerations in mind. Going into winter is not the optimal time to trim/prune evergreens (you will be leaving a wound which could harbor disease) so harvest your greens with a light hand. Consider the natural shape of the bush before you cut. Especially if you are going to use your cuttings inside the house, treat them with an anti-dessicant spray (Wilt-Stop is available at the nursery) to help the foliage retain moisture.

Show-off Fall Flowering Bushes

Many summer-blooming shrubs give you the added bonus of amazing fall color and berries long after they have bloomed. They can easily become garden focal points or work with existing and established fall plantings. Some have stems which stand out even longer into the winter landscape and provide an unexpected punch of color to what is often a dull, gray time of year. Consider adding:

***Rhus aromatica* ('Gro-Low' Sumac)**

H: 18-24"

Full sun to partial shade

Average soil

This outstanding groundcover shrub spreads to 8' and is perfect for covering flat and sloping areas. Tiny yellow flowers cover the plant in late spring; dark green summer foliage turns orange, red and burgundy in the fall. This shrub is drought and deer resistant as well as being bee friendly!

***Callicarpa dichotama* (Purple Beautyberry)**

H: 3-4'

Sun to light shade

Well-drained soil

Pink flowers in late summer are followed by striking purple berries lasting through the winter. Very attractive to cardinals, this shrub is very graceful with downward-arching branches. Since it flowers and fruits on new growth, cut back to 18" in the spring.

***Ilex verticillata* (Winterberry)**

H: 6-10'

Sun to part shade

Evenly moist soil

An obvious choice for native gardens, this shrub's red berries last well into the winter and are most attractive to birds, especially robins. Planted in mass, Winterberry will form large colonies. One male plant is needed for pollination to ensure fruit set.

Clethra alnifolia (Summersweet)

H: 3-8'

Sun to part shade

Average to wet soil

Native to the East Coast, Clethra's July-August white flower bloom time is followed by yellow fall foliage. It is attractive to all pollinators and very much at home in naturalized settings. Songbirds enjoy its fruit during the early winter months.

Lindera benzoin (Spice Bush)

H: 6-12'

Sun to part shade

Well-drained soil

Covered with fragrant yellow-green flowers in early spring, this bush's leaves turn a deep yellow-gold in the fall. Birds feed on the small red fruits formed on female plants but pollinators in general are attracted to these bushes, especially the Swallowtail butterfly. Drought and deer tolerant, its red fruit attracts migrating birds.

Aronia (Chokeberry)

H: 3-6'

Sun to part shade

Well-drained soil

This attractive bush is native to the Northeast. White blooms in May give way to purple/red fall cover with black berries. Somewhat leggy, Aronia attracts many birds with its edible fruit.

Changing to Fall/Winter Containers

Mums are not the only seasonal choice for replanting tired-looking containers. If the container is completely winter proof, perennial grasses can be planted and will provide a refuge for birds as well as decorating the landscape. Adding gourds will give a Thanksgiving touch. Heucheras, Euphorbias and Ivy can be combined for a new look. Cabbages can provide a splash with their beautiful leaves and pansies will add a cheerful note. Window boxes can be re-planted to brighten the winter landscape. Use small cultivars of Boxwood, Cypress or Viburnum trilobum (American Cranberry) to establish a fresh look and tuck in a few pansies. Some of the newer dwarf-shrubs can be placed into containers for the winter and then transplanted to the garden in the spring. Be sure your container can withstand frost and dropping temperatures. If a light frost threatens, extend bloom time by bringing your containers and hanging baskets into the garage overnight. Put them back outside in the morning and continue to enjoy their color.

Container plantings for fall rely heavily on using the colors of fall foliage as a way to extend the season. Come to the nursery and see how many choices are waiting on the benches! Once your containers are planted, stop applying liquid fertilizer which might encourage too much new growth. Keep watering the containers until the soil freezes.

Containers can also make the switch to winter very easily. Think about adding small evergreens which can be transplanted into the garden in the spring. Back them with colored stems for a little punch. Use branches with berries and add cut evergreens and cones as the holidays approach. Place the winter containers where they can be seen from the house as a way to connect the outside landscape to the inside.

Getting the Garden Ready for Winter

Last spring, New England gardeners discovered, once again, what a long, wet winter can do to trees, shrubs and perennials! Extreme cold isn't always the biggest problem. Early cold spells can damage plants that haven't gone through the normal "hardening off" period. Dry winds can "burn" conifer needles and

broadleaf evergreen foliage. Unexpected midwinter thaws can fool plants into breaking dormancy too early, leaving them vulnerable to the next cold snap. Freeze/thaw cycles can heave plants out of the ground. Deer, chipmunk, rabbits and other critters will gnaw bark during the winter and leave evergreens and shrubs damaged. Snow is actually your friend! A constant layer of snow cover provides moisture and helps insulate soil and roots against fluctuating temperatures. Gardeners, as well as skiers, hope for snow!

Healthy plants are more likely to survive winter unscathed. Start your winter protection routine in autumn. Don't prune after midsummer. Pruning can stimulate new, tender growth and can delay dormancy. Stop fertilizing plants 6 weeks before the first fall frost to help plants harden off. Water thoroughly until the ground freezes.

Perennials

Most plants need to be cut back after heavy, killing frosts to prevent disease and pest problems in the spring but doing this too early can deprive roots of gaining energy from the fading leaves. Any diseased or bug-infested leaves should be bagged and put in the garbage, not the compost pile. Compost is a soil conditioner, not a fertilizer, so apply it now to get a jump on spring. Do a final weeding. Edge your beds and start the next gardening year looking neat and tidy. A light winter mulch will help keep the soil temperature even. Waiting until the ground is frozen to apply mulch will discourage rodents from making nests and building condos.

Shade Plants

Ferns. If your ferns are growing in a natural, woodland setting, you can leave the dying fronds in place. They will decompose naturally and the new fronds will be able to easily push up through the spent foliage in the spring. The spent fronds will protect the fern's crown throughout the winter and you can tidy up the plant in the spring.

Hosta. Hostas are very low on the fall maintenance scale! After a hard frost, cut the entire plant back to the ground. (Removing the dead leaves will discourage slugs.) Don't compost the dead leaves as you could spread disease. Light mulch (only an inch or two) will discourage pests and protect the root system. Hostas can be divided in the fall before the first frost. Each new plant should be watered well but not fertilized until early spring.

For more information, please access our information sheet **Putting the Garden to Bed for the Winter** on the Acer Garden website.

The Vegetable Garden

Some herbs, such as mint and parsley, can be potted up now and grown on a windowsill throughout the winter. Try to provide them with some humidity and do not over-water.

If you didn't use all your herbs, you can dry them easily in the microwave. Arrange sprigs of thyme, basil, oregano or rosemary in a single layer on a paper towel on a large paper plate and cover with a second paper towel. Microwave on High for 1 - 1 1/2 minutes or until dry and brittle. Remove the leaves from the stems. Cool them and then crumble into small, labeled Ziploc bags. They can be stored for 1 year and will retain their bright green color. Do not freeze.

Remove any large leaves that might be blocking sunlight from developing pumpkins and squashes. This will help them ripen fully and deter bugs, insects and "critters" from moving in.

Leave carrots, leeks, parsnips, radishes, beets, kale, Swiss chard and turnips in the garden so that you can harvest them through the fall. If you are storing root crops, cut down the tops to about ½" but don't wash the vegetables. Keep them in a dark, cool place, above freezing. When you harvest your onions, let them dry outside in the sun for a few days before cleaning them and bringing them inside for storage. When its foliage turns yellow, dig up potato plants. The potato vine can act as the host to late tomato blight so be careful to discard all parts of the potato plant in a bag in the garbage can, not in the compost heap. (In fact, tomatoes and all squashes should also be discarded in bags.) After a killing frost, pull up tomato, squash and bean plants.

Clean out the vegetable garden. Remove all old plants and fruits (roots, leaves and stems) but do not put them in the compost bin ... burn or put in garbage bags to help prevent the spread of disease and insects. Double dig the empty bed and add compost to be ready for early spring plantings. Cover your strawberries lightly with straw not hay (which harbors weeds). Remember to make a chart of the layout of your vegetable bed so that you can rotate the crops next spring. Re-assess your plantings to decide if you grew the right "mix" for your family's eating habits and leave room to try something new and different.

Take a moment to think about ways to expand next year's vegetable garden by re-arranging space. More abundant harvests are possible by not planting just in rows. Peas, cucumbers and pole beans can all be grown on stakes or trellises as long as you allow for the weight of the mature plant. Adding a raised bed can expand your options. Many new varieties of vegetables have been developed recently to accommodate gardeners who grow vegetables in containers on the patio. Small-sized vegetables currently available include bush cucumbers and patio tomatoes but new varieties are constantly being introduced.

It's Bulb Time!

A beautiful spring garden depends heavily on bulbs. Given enough moisture, bulbs will grow in almost any kind of garden soil. This year, Acer Gardens has many different kinds of bulbs available, with a greatly expanded selection. Tulips are here in many vibrant colors as are the familiar Daffodils and Hyacinths. Bulbs are an easy way to add color and diversity to existing beds and will provide welcome color after a long winter! It's a good idea to plant a few unexpected/unusual bulbs in areas you can see from the house. Try tucking them in under low, spreading evergreens so that they will poke through the branches. Daffodils and Paper Whites for forcing and large-sized Amaryllis bulbs, some pre-potted, will also be available at the nursery.

Don't be afraid to mix-and-match your bulbs and to plant in drifts. Careful planning can give you bulb bloom from March to May. Naturalizing gives an informal look and is a particularly useful technique for bulbs that multiply easily. Once flowers fade, the foliage keeps growing so choose a site that doesn't need early spring mowing. Bulbs want well-drained soil. Avoid planting bulbs in areas that remain wet for a long time as they may rot. Oddly enough, some smaller bulbs simply don't have a true "pointy side up" so just lay the bulb on its side when you plant it; it will generally right itself and grow toward the sun. In general, bulbs should be planted to a depth of 3 times the diameter of the bulbs and then fertilized. Bulbs send out roots soon after planting so, unless rain is forecast, give your newly planted bulbs a good watering.

Before planting, store your bulbs in a cool, dry place with low humidity away from heat and strong sunlight. Wait to plant until the ground has cooled down to around 55 F so that they don't grow unnecessary top growth and waste their energies. Late October to mid-November is optimum planting time for this area although Lilies should not be planted until well into November. As you plant your bulbs, add Bulb Tone fertilizer before back-filling the dirt. When the bulbs have bloomed in the spring and the foliage has died back, top dress the bulbs again with Bulb Tone.

Daffodils should be planted in well-draining soil where they will get 5-6 hours of direct sunlight, even after they have bloomed. That sunlight will help them produce next year's flowers. Fertilize the bulbs lightly as the shoots emerge in early spring. After the daffodils have bloomed, wait at least 8 weeks before cutting off the foliage. Don't be tempted to braid the leaves ... this year's leaves make next year's flowers!

Little Bulbs = Big Effect

Adding small bulbs to your established gardens is a quick way to enhance your early Spring plantings and a fun way to experiment with "new looks". The best looks are achieved by planting in fairly large drifts, adding an early pop of color after the long winter. These little bulbs are all early bloomers so it's a good idea to position them where you will see them as you go in and out of the house. As an added bonus, many of the small bulbs have proven to be very resistant to vole damage and to deer.

Try experimenting with some of these:

***Galanthus woronowii* (Snowdrops)**

Height: 5-8"

Bloom: March/April

Grown since 1893, Snowdrops' white flowers and shiny foliage really will come through a snow covering to welcome Spring. Grow in partial sunlight, planted 4" deep, spaced 2-4" apart.

***Allium oreophilum* 'Mountain Bells'**

Height: 8-12"

Bloom: Early Spring

Extremely hardy and low maintenance, these fragrant bulbs come in a pink, white and yellow mix. They are happy in full sun to partial shade, will increase yearly, make good cut flowers and should be planted in groups, 3" deep, 2-3" apart.

***Chionodoxa forbesii* (Glory of the Snow) 'Pink Giant'**

Height: 5-6"

Bloom: April

Early blooming, these blue, white-centered, star-shaped flowers can produce 8 flowers per stem. Plant 4" deep in full to part sun. These bulbs are good for forcing.

***Scilla siberica* (Siberian Squill)**

Height: 5"

Bloom: April

Grown since 1796, these blue flowers force well and will naturalize and self-sow in the garden. Plant 5" deep, 4-6" apart in full to part sun.

***Muscari armeniacum* (Grape Hyacinth)**

Height: 6"

Bloom: April-May

A prolific naturalizer, these deer-resistant, bright blue flowered bulbs last for weeks. Plant in front of taller daffodils for a stunning effect. Good for forcing, the bulbs should be planted 5" deep, 3-4" apart.

Photograph your garden before you plant your bulbs and mark the photographs so that you know where the new bulbs have been situated. Many gardeners keep a special “bulb” album to help them remember plantings.

Holiday Flowers

Some flowers just seem to be part of the holiday season! Poinsettias and Amaryllis bring bright color to the celebrations and beyond to the gray days of winter. Take advantage of all the new varieties currently available on-line and at the nursery.

Poinsettia

Some Poinsettias can remain in bloom for 2-6 months! They prefer a day temperature of 67 degrees, hate drafts and like a humid environment and the bright, indirect light of an east window. This year, the nursery has new varieties available including Strawberry and Cream and even some pink-colored Poinsettias. Our Poinsettias will be ready for sale just before Thanksgiving.

Amaryllis

Acer has a remarkable selection of amaryllis bulbs available this year, including a wide selection of unusual shapes and color combinations in # 1 size for you to plant in your own containers. Allow 8-12 weeks from potting to bloom and start them at 10 day intervals so that you will have flowers all winter long. Plant one bulb, firmly, to a pot and place in indirect sunlight at room temperature. Room temperature of 60-75 is ideal. (Be sure to place a saucer under the pot.) Water after potting and then only when the soil is dry to the touch. Do not mist.

As the flowers fade, cut off the entire stalk. You may get lucky and get another bloom! Amaryllis should spend the summer outdoors in the sun. Around Labor Day, stop any watering, cut off the leaves and store the bulbs in their pots in the cellar, away from any sun. Do not water them until you are ready to start the forcing cycle again. Be patient. Amaryllis can be slow to get going!

Forcing Bulbs

Forcing and growing bulbs indoors gives us a way to have flowers blooming even with snow on the ground and makes a great family winter project. “Forcing” is simply a way of making a bulb produce leaves and flowers ahead of its natural outdoor schedule. You speed up the process by manipulating time and temperature.

Almost any container can be used for forcing bulbs but you will need a run-off saucer under the container if it has drainage holes. Fill the container 2/3 full of soil and moisten. Place the bulbs (close together but not touching) and gently press down. Add soil to the top of the container, water, and put in a cool, dark place like a refrigerator or unheated garage/cellar. Chilling for at least 6-8 weeks will imitate dormancy. Flowering will take about 12 weeks for snowdrops, crocus and daffodils and about 16 weeks for tulips. When you see shoots about 3” above the soil line, bring the bulbs into a cool location. When the foliage and buds are well developed, move the pots to a bright, sunny window.

Forcing paper-whites is particularly easy because the bulbs do not require a chilling period and need only 5-6 weeks from planting to bloom. You’ll have Christmas flowers if you start your paper-whites by November 10. Plant at 2-week intervals and enjoy blooms from Christmas to Easter.

Paper-whites grow best using the stones and water method: take a waterproof bowl and fill it 2/3 full of gravel or small, decorative stones, usually white. Insert the base of the bulbs so that they sit firmly and add more stones but do not cover them. Pour in water up to the base of the bulbs, replenishing as needed, and store in a cool, dark place (usually 2-3 weeks) until first growth appears. Some people add 1 Tb. of vodka or plain gin to the paper-white water after the bulbs come out of their storage period. This helps keep the stems short and prevents toppling but will not interfere with bloom. Do not fertilize the bulbs.

Forcing is very hard on most bulbs and they will not bloom again. Tulips and paper-whites should just be thrown out. Amaryllis will usually re-bloom successfully (see above directions.)

Acer Gardens' information sheet on **Forcing Bulbs** is available on the web site and at the nursery.

Last Chores

Clean out the bird feeders and prepare them for the coming season. Store bird seed in metal garbage cans with tight-fitting lids to discourage access by mice.

Empty containers, clean and place in the garage. Some alpine troughs (Hypertufa) can be left out if placed near the house but stone planters are not winter-proof in this climate and should be stored in the garage.

Clean out the wheelbarrow and discard any damaged garden gloves/tools. Clean and sharpen garden tools. Leave everything tidy on the garden shelves. Some gardeners claim an open jar (or small Ziploc bag) of dried mint leaves left near the house entrance from the garage helps to discourage mice from entering.

Drain and store the hoses. Turn off all outside water faucets. Hardware stores are now carrying simple snap-on winter covers for outside faucets and they appear to be very effective.

General Reminder

Acer Gardens will close on 12/23 and, weather permitting, will re-open the last weekend of March 2021.

Acer Gardens
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Editor

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