

Are You Ready for Autumn?

By Susan Camp

Last week I met three friends in Yorktown for our monthly lunch date. On our way back to the parking garage, we noticed that some of the perennials in the borders had gone to seed. One woman commented, “Well, those need to be cut back.” Someone else said, “I just leave the seedheads over the winter for the birds to eat.”

It is only August and she was talking about cold weather, but then I realized that the subtle, late summer, season change had occurred. One morning we notice that the morning breeze feels a little cooler and by afternoon the angle of sunlight through the trees is softer. The daylilies are finished and their foliage scraggly and turning yellow. Astilbes and hostas are past their peak and annuals are looking leggy. Mother Nature doesn't keep a calendar app on her smartphone to tell her when fall is supposed to arrive and it doesn't matter what our calendars say. One day we look up and see that the leaves on the shade trees look shopworn, like they have been on display a little too long and have lost their summer luster.

The practical side of this romantic image is that with the beginning of autumn comes a new set of garden chores. While less exciting than the anticipation of springtime growth, fall cleanup tasks are necessary and satisfactory in their own way. Cleaning out spent flowers and vegetables makes room to plant fall perennials, vegetables, and newly separated irises, daylilies, and hostas.

I decided to look at a variety of publications for suggestions about fall gardening tasks. I started with the Master Gardener handouts “Gardening Activities” for August and September. The handouts are available from the Gloucester Master Gardeners' Horticultural Desk at the Gloucester Main Library every Tuesday from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Each flyer is divided by gardening topic and covers basic tasks to be completed each month. Online articles and blogs are helpful, too. Gardening blogs, in particular, can give you an idea of how other gardeners cope with issues of weather, insects, and disease in their own gardens.

I found that a number of suggestions for fall cleanup and planting are universal. Trees and shrubs planted now will have time to set roots and become well-established before next summer. Don't fertilize trees, shrubs, and other plants after September. Continue to compost kitchen scraps, grass clippings, and raked leaves. The material will break down during the winter, just a little more slowly. Harvest remaining outdoor herbs, especially tender annuals like basil. Plant kitchen herbs in pots for fresh herbs all winter long. Rake up leaf debris under rosebushes and crabapple trees to prevent the fungi that cause black spot on roses and scab on crabapples from producing spores that will infect the plants next spring. Don't compost this debris; bag it and put it in the garbage.

Some publications included fall tasks I had not considered before, like how to protect your fishpond over the winter and how to dispose of outdated or unused garden chemicals. One

blogger suggested assessing your garden for what worked well this year and what needs improvement for better flower or vegetable production next year. Ask yourself if your soil is healthy and if the irrigation is sufficient. Did any of your plants grow out of control? Would a different tool be helpful for planting and cultivating?

Fall is a great time to redesign flower and vegetable gardens or create new ones. Once your fall gardening cleanup has been completed, you will want to think about planting fall perennials, trees and shrubs, and daffodils for next spring. The 13th Annual Plant Extravaganza, presented by the Gloucester Master Gardeners, will be held on Saturday, September 19th from 8 a.m. to 12 noon in the parking lot next to the Main Library, so mark your calendars!

August 27, 2015