

Dahlias – to dig or not to dig?

Rumors of frost abound: it has been detected in Mathews but it hasn't visited Gloucester Courthouse as I write. Dahlias are sensitive to cold and the tops will blacken by the first hard frost. This is not your cue to dig them up! You can cut back the blackened foliage, leaving six or eight inches of stem, but leave the plant for a week or ten days enabling it to go dormant.

Technically, in our area, you can mulch the bed and wait for spring. In bitter cold places or where beds are not perfectly drained or offering an invitation to burrowing munchers, it is best to dig them up. Gently using a fork may result in fewer slices into the tuberous roots than wielding a spade. The roots should be cured by spreading them in a tray and allowing them to dry in the sun for several hours.

They can then be stored where the temperature is between 40 and 45 degrees with a covering of dry vermiculite or coir to prevent the roots from drying out completely. If you have raised your dahlias from seed you have permission to treat them as annuals. If they survive, good. If not, buy more seeds next spring.

One interesting fact: when first exported to Europe by Spanish explorers in Mexico, a young Swedish scientist named Dahl first hybridized them. Their popularity soared during the 19th century when the tubers offered hope as a food source. French cows, and diners, pronounced them inedible. Oddly, French cows like sweet potatoes but French diners consider them fit food for livestock.

In England the dahlia tubers were eaten because they had been passed off as Jerusalem artichokes. All of that culinary experimentation faded as hybridization produced flowers worthy of enhancing gardens and generations of dahlias becoming ever larger and more glamorous.

Do not let this tale coax you into indiscriminate nibbling in the garden. For example, elderberries, *Sambucus* spp, make delicious wine and pies but the raw berries contain some cyanide, not enough to kill you but enough to make you ill. Another dangerous delicacy is the cashew nut shell. You usually see them shelled but in case you wish to grow your own, the shells contain the same poison that makes poison ivy such a menace, urushiol.

Everyone has been warned about the danger of castor beans, *Ricinus communis*. A handsome plant for the back of the border, it has large spectacular leaves but the beans are poison. They may still be used for castor oil, an early 20th century cure for whatever ailed children, but three or four beans could be fatal.

Another caution for crock-pot devotees: be sure red kidney beans are fully cooked. If undercooked a harmful compound can induce the nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea of bean poisoning. In any event, canned beans are easier- just rinse and use! One other charming plant with harmful seeds is the lantana. It is prized in our area

because it copes with heat and humidity. More and more cultivars are available that flourish north of its southern origin in full sun and well-drained soil.

Lantana camera or shrub verbena also has irritating foliage but it is the seeds that should be trimmed away. Several cultivars good here are sterile; 'Miss Huff', 'New Gold', and 'Mozelle'. Don't trim back this shrub until after the last frost date in spring but at that time it can be severely cut back and the dead wood removed.

A correction:-In the October 10 garden column I identified the purple leaved plant with the triangular pink bloom as Tradescantia pallida 'Purpurea' but reading about plants for southern gardens I saw the same plant called Setcreasia pallida or S. purpurea. The common name is purple heart or purple queen. The plant has been reassigned from niche to niche but it remains a member of the spiderwort family. You recognize that family by noting all the threes involved. There are three petals, three sepals, six stamens.

Purple heart is perennial in zones 8 and warmer but may winter over here in a sheltered spot. It survives sun, shade, and salt spray and one hybrid S.p. 'Kartzu Giant' grows to three feet, twice as commanding as the straight species and is hardy in zone 7. Fortunately these plants are not fussy about soil, so long as it is well drained and fairly moist. As a bonus, it is undeterred by our summer norms- heat and humidity. Another cultivar, S.p. 'Variegata' produces long purple leaves splashed with pink. Seen often in pots, they can surely be used in mixed borders where a contrasting foliage is needed.