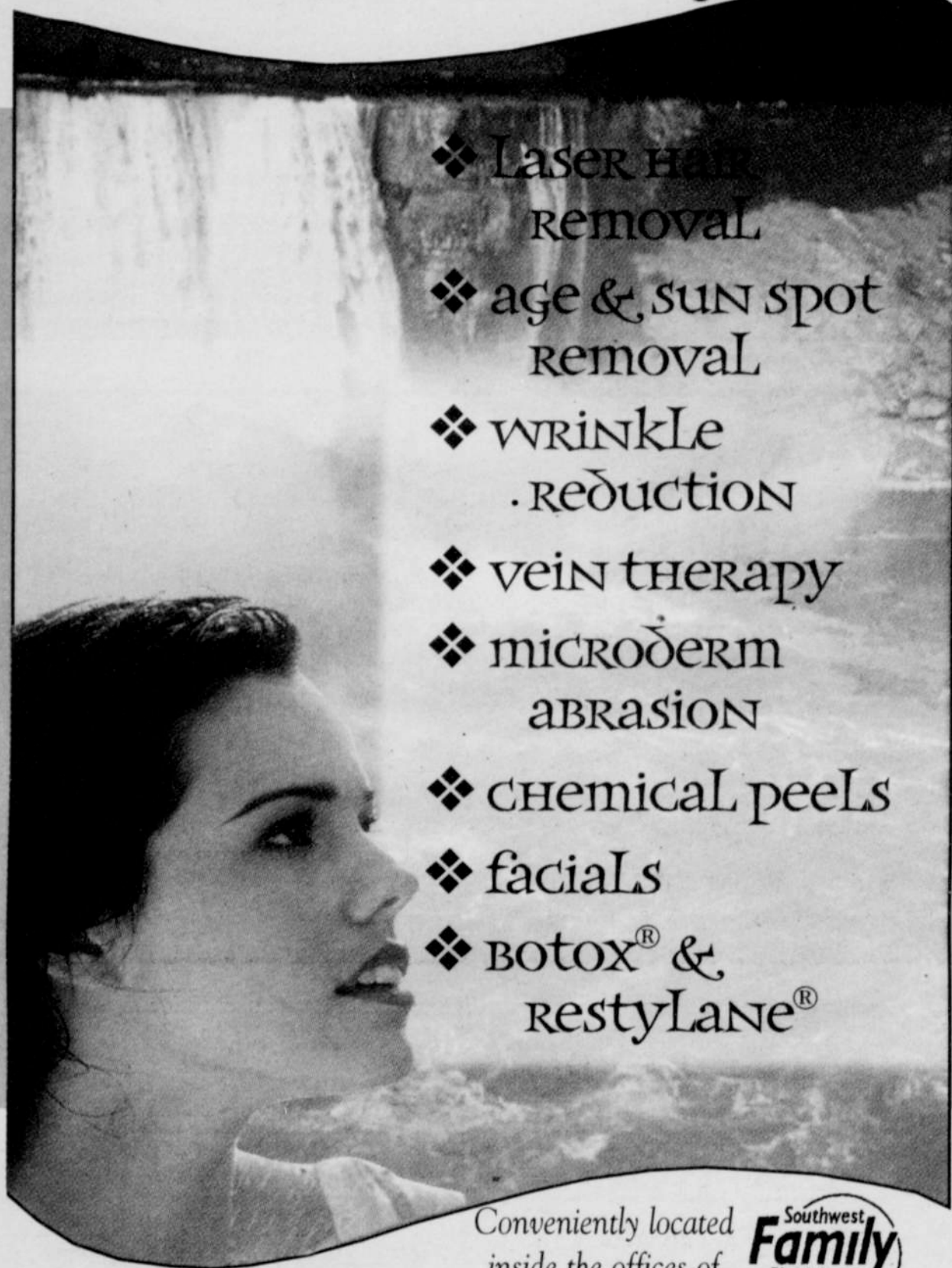


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FALL START

Autumn interest and pruning suggestions

I'd like to start by thanking those of you who wrote to me with your questions and positive feedback. I know that I may ruffle a few feathers by saying this, but sorry enough summer is coming to an end. I know, it makes me a bit misty-eyed, too. But now at least we can appreciate the coming season, and there are still quite a few plants that haven't even had their time to shine yet.

Which leads me to my first question from Jason of Southeast Portland:

Every year around this time I go to nurseries to find plants for my garden, but all I ever find are those cabbage things and mums. Do you have any suggestions for anything more fun than that with fall interest?

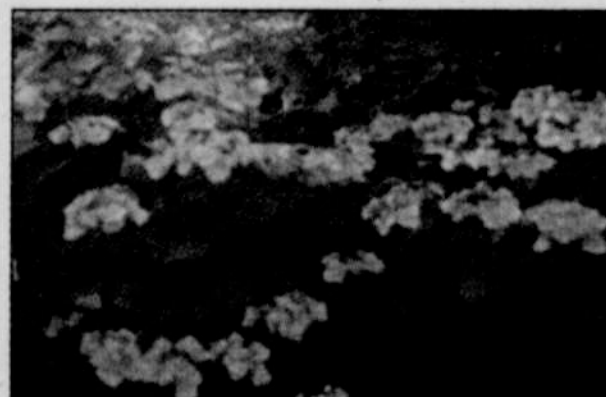
Well, dear Jason, there are plenty of other plants than those nasty old cabbages. If it's flowers you are after, I might suggest looking for some autumn sage, *salvia greggii*. The common name pretty much sums it up. They bloom from late summer straight through until the first frost. You will probably find a number of cultivars out there ranging in color from red to pink to purple and even yellow. I have found these salvias to be really easy to grow, given they get plenty of sun and good drainage. There is strenuous debate concerning whether they are winter-hardy in the Portland area, but I can say that I have never had one die out during the winter.

Another plant that I love in the fall is the *Knifophia* "Yellow Cheer." The bright yellow 5-foot-tall flowers of this cultivar don't appear until October. I love it even out of bloom. The shiny green foliage is structural enough to hold its own in a shrub border or be the strappy backbone to a perennial garden.

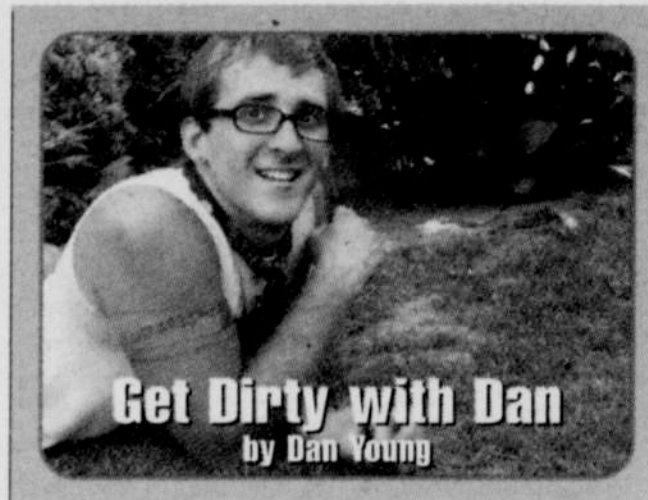
Well, Jason, I hope that these will help steer you clear of another year of dreary mums.

The next question is one that baffles a lot of people, and I hope I can help demystify it. It comes from Shannon of Northeast Portland:

Last fall I bought a house, and there were three huge, beautiful hydrangeas in the front yard covered in blooms. In the spring I cut



Hydrangea color is affected by the pH of the soil in which it grows.



them back. By the time everyone else's hydrangeas in the neighborhood were in full bloom, I had about 10 little flowers on each plant. What gives? They are also pinkish, and I heard there is something I can do to change the color. What is it?

Shannon, the second part of your question is the easiest. The pH of your soil will determine

the color of your hydrangea, so with a little help from chemistry you can change it. If you want your hydrangea to be more blue, add aluminum sulfate around the base of the plant. If you are after a more vibrant pink, add lime. You can do this at this time of the year and again in the spring. Some patience is required; it can take a season or two before you reach the color you desire.

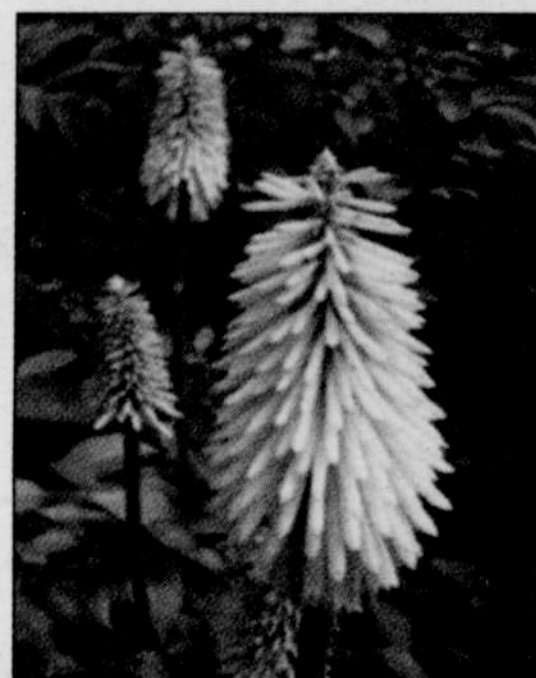
As for the pruning: If you have the good old-fashioned hydrangea *macrophylla*, the time to prune is now or even a bit earlier. These hydrangeas will bloom on old wood, which means the branches they grow this year contain the flower buds for next year's blooms. When you do a heavy pruning in the spring like you did, you are basically cutting off all the flowers. As the flowers start to fade on your plants, it's time to get out the pruners.

Start by removing old weak wood, crisscrossed branches and extra-long shoots to a healthy bud. Shorten all other shoots down to the second or third pair of leaves from the tip or the flower. This is where new buds are forming. Pruning at this

time of year allows the plant enough time to grow and harden off enough wood to ensure blooms for you next year. I know pruning is something that can be a bit confusing, and fortunately the American Horticultural Society has published a great book called *Pruning and Training* by David Brickell. This book is so easy to follow and makes the scary questions of when and how so much child's play.

Until next time, this is Dirty Dan signing out! 

To reach DIRTY DAN, e-mail dirtydthegardener@yahoo.com.



Knifophia rises head and shoulders above decorative kale as a fall gardening pleasure.



This *salvia* stays blooming until the first frost.