

Diggin' In The Dirt: October Transition Tips

By Kim Camarda

October in the garden and around the home tends to be clean up month-- the time to put things away and start getting prepared for winter. It's a transition month as we harvest the last of the summer crops and even start planning for next spring. October weather can be unpredictable-- if it's hot, we can let some things go, if it gets cold, start getting ready for winter. Get a jump on anything you don't want to do in the rain or the snow.

Planting Tips

Bulbs-- Spring flowering bulbs can be planted now through November. Plant in well-drained soil and add bone meal or bulb food. Tender bulbs should be planted in a special basket or loosely wrapped in a mesh wire to prevent animals from eating them or digging them up. Dig and divide crowded bulbs to increase stock and improve their bloom for next year.

Cover Crops-- Early October is time to sow field peas, clovers, and vetch; they will grow slowly through winter, then can be plowed under next spring.

Ground Covers-- Early October should have them in the ground, so they will establish over winter and have a burst of new growth next spring. If you are planting in a windy or large open space, surround with straw or buffering compost mound for a little protection.

Perennials-- Fall planted perennials will have the entire winter to put out roots, then grow and flower next spring. Trim or stake bushy herbaceous perennials to prevent wind damage. Protect young or exposed perennials with a circle of straw or compost. Dig and divide crowded perennials to increase stock and improve their bloom for next year.

Trees & Shrubs-- This is the best time of year to plant your trees, shrubs, landscape plants and ornamentals. They like the cooler ground temps.

Maintenance Tips

Annuals-- Continue to dead-head if healthy and still

putting out color, otherwise pull and toss into the compost pile.

Fuschias-- Place hanging pots of fuchsias where they won't freeze, set pots inside (ideally off the ground), either on slats of wood, straw, or cardboard. If we get a ground level freeze, they will be less likely to freeze at the bottom. Don't cut them back until spring.

Roses-- Let some roses go to hips-- leave a few spent flower heads since this helps the plant wind down into winter dormancy. Rose leaves should be hot composted as black spot is an airborne menace. Cut back any dead wood. And mulch over the roots for winter.

Azaleas, Rhododendrons-- Remove faded flowers, trim out any dead wood. Place mulch over roots for winter protection, especially if in an open windy area likely to freeze or have snow pile up.

Planting & Harvesting Fruits & Veggies

Harvest crops from your beds/rows every other day, keeping up on rot and disease so as not to spread either. Check often and discard rotting fruit.

Plant cool season vegetables, such as broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower from starts.

Harvest sunflower heads; use seed for birdseed or roast for personal use.

Plant garlic and onion bulbs for harvesting next summer.

Dig and store potatoes, keeping in a dark place with moderate humidity and the temp at about 40°F. Discard unused potatoes if they sprout. Don't use as seed potatoes for next year.

Harvest and immediately dry filberts and walnuts; dry at 95° to 100°F.

Pick tomatoes as soon as they start to show color and ripen inside on a window sill.

Harvest and store apples; keep at about 40°F, moderate humidity. Remove and dispose of windfall apples that might be harboring apple maggot or codling moth larvae, hot compost these. Spray apple (and stone fruit) trees at leaf-fall to prevent various fungal and bacterial diseases.

Dig and divide rhubarb (should be done about every 4 years)-- then

cover with a mulch of manure or compost.

Cover asparagus with mulch/compost layer as well.

Prune out dead fruiting canes in raspberries, train and prune primocanes of raspberry-- mulching the roots of all berries for overwintering.

Harvest squash and pumpkins; keep in dry area at 55° to 60°F.

Harvest seeds from the vegetable and flower garden. Dry, date, label, and store in a cool and dry location.

Plant vegetable gardens to a fall cover-crop such as annual ryegrass, crimson clover, Austrian Peas, fava beans or common vetch (some animals should not ingest vetch, check before using). They will protect the soil from erosion and add organic matter to the soil when they are tilled under in the spring.

Houseplants and Indoor Gardening

Check/treat houseplants for disease and insects before bringing indoors. Remove dead or dying bits. Top with soil if needed.

For Christmas cactus to bloom in December, reduce water now, move to a cool spot (50-55 degrees), and increase time in the shade or darkness to 12-14 hours.

October Water Concerns

It is important to continue to water established plants deeply; it will take the first two weeks of the rainy season to fully penetrate the dry hard soil of our area. Drought-stressed plants are more likely to be damaged in hard winters than are their hydrated counterparts.

Lawns-- There is still time to sow and patch if your lawn is spotty. The coming rains will ensure moisture. Early October is an excellent time to plant lawns, either sod or seed.

Set mowing heights a half-inch shorter each time you mow, until it is set to 1.5-2 inches. This shorter mowing height will reduce diseases during rainy weather. Aerating the lawn will help the grass tolerate soggy soil from winter rain.

Time to apply a fall and winter fertilizer. Also, apply lime so the winter rains will carry it deep into the soil. If needed, apply moss-control in shady areas before the moss crowds out the grass.

Maintenance and Clean Up

The Greenhouse-- Clean and paint greenhouses and cold frames for plant storage and winter growth. Repair any damage done over the summer months.

Clean, sharpen and oil tools and equipment before storing for winter. I keep mine in a bucket of oiled sand over the winter and do a spring clean/maintenance routine as well.


Bleach dunk any containers you plan on reusing, and any hand tools you will use over the winter.

The Big House-- Check for outside pipe leaks now, and do any necessary repairs or replacements. Fix any gutter or roof issues before the rains come later in the month. Check rain barrels, hoses & irrigation systems for leaks and cracks.

Kim Camarda is the owner of Camarda Gardens at 1103 Bridge Street in Vernonia. Kim is a graduate of the Floral Design Institute and has years of landscape design experience in 3 different states. She hopes to grow her business to include modern-day homesteading practices and supplies including hands-on workshops. You can reach Kim at 503-805-7575 with questions and ideas for workshops.

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