

Make next year's garden better this fall

by JUDE RAMSAY JENSEN

"... Feel the summer in your bones"
Sister Autumn chaperones.

Paul Young
20th Century English composer

Summer wanes. The sun tracks lower in the sky. The nip of autumn cools the night air, and the smell of woodsmoke on the wind reminds us that the end of the summer gardening season draws near.

It's time to step back and take inventory, time to count the successes and note the disappointments, areas where plant performance did not meet expectations. Time to plan and prepare for next year's garden, the best one ever. In so doing, the organic gardener looks first to the soil.

Several factors influence plant performance. Weather, proper timing and exposure, and seed viability (the ability of a seed to sprout and grow with vigor) account for much of it.

But no matter what the crop — trees, shrubs, vegetables, herbs, flowers — the most influential factor governing plant performance is the soil. It's where the plants live, their home for life. And it's where good garden management begins.

The organic philosophy of soil management is a simple one: You, as gardener, "pay back" (in the form of nutrient-rich, organic materials) more than you "withdrew" (by raising plants, which draw nutrients from the soil for growth, reproduction) in imitation of nature, maintaining a healthy balance of air, water, nutrients, insects and soil microorganisms, all essential for the support of plant life.

Humus-rich garden soil harbors the conditions for maintaining that balance. Besides supporting a thriving colony of beneficial bacteria, fungi, and earth-manufacturing worms, soil high in humus content is good insurance that the proper amounts of plant foods, air and water

remain trapped in the plants' root feeding zone.

By looking first to soil health, the organic gardener is using a form of preventative soil "medicine." Healthy soil produces strong plants. Strong plants are better able to defend themselves against frost, drought, heat, disease and insect attack. This translates, in the long run, into less work, and more successes, for the gardener.

Fall is the best time of year to begin soil conditioning. The soil is more receptive, more workable. Many humus-building materials are available now. And the organic gardener has more choices at this time of year as to the method of building healthy soil. Whichever method you choose, you'll have a head start on next year's garden, and your plants will love you for it.

MULCHING: If you mulched your garden this summer, you already have a jump on soil conditioning. It has begun the decomposition process

during the summer, and it is left to you to simply turn it under at the end of the garden season to further decompose and add humus content to the soil's structure. A small list of suitable mulching materials includes straw, hay, leaves, manure, compost, rice hulls, pine needles, sawdust and grass clippings. All of them, when turned under, work to create a bulky, friable soil.

SHEET COMPOSTING: This is a large-scale mulching operation. Leaves, hay, manure, etc., are spread over the entire garden area, along with any rock fertilizers (lime, greensand, rock phosphate, potash rock) and bone meal, blood meal, etc., then are worked into the soil to decompose overwinter. This is best accomplished with a rototiller, but can be hand-done with a spade. You can save yourself double work by spreading the materials over crop residue left after harvest and tilling it all under at the same time.

COVER CROPPING: Planting a cover crop serves two purposes; 1) It holds the soil in the garden, preventing erosion during the onslaught of heavy fall and winter rains. 2) It is turned under in the springtime as green manure to facilitate soil building. Fall is an excellent time to plant a cover crop. Annual rye, oats,

winter wheat, fava beans, cowpeas and clover are but a few of the types of seed available in our area. Plant them, in most cases, no later than mid-September. They will make enough growth by the time the snow flies to survive the winter. Next spring, 6-8 weeks before planting, till the cover crop under.

Cactus business booms despite climate

by JAN COOLEY

Peg Spaete does not need a desert to grow the 2,000 cactuses and other succulents she mothers to maturity.

Spaete raises the plants in her back yard and sells them through her business, Plants by Peg.

Succulents — plants that store water and nutrients in tubers, stems or leaves — usually are associated with hot, dry climates. But Spaete, who has spent most of her life in cool, northern locales, is a specialist in succulents. She grows some 2,000 species despite Oregon's wet, relatively cold weather.

"Many people have the myth that cacti grow only in deserts," she says. She is out to dispel that myth.

She grows the plants in three greenhouses lined up in her spacious back yard in Boring. A few varieties live out of doors in borders or hanging baskets. But except for the newborns — seedlings or cuttings that get nursery-like care — she does not bring them into her house.

"When they're in the house, they become part of the fixture," she explains. "Then I forget."

She does reserve one room of her home for two filing cabinets filled with notes documenting the research she has done on propagating and caring for succulents. One wall of Spaete's office is lined with bookshelves filled with neatly catalogued magazines, journals, correspondence and boxes of index cards filled with even more information. Many of the journals contain articles Spaete wrote.

"Timber Press has been after me

to write a book (about succulents), but I'm too busy volunteering to make money," she says, only half joking.

Her volunteer work includes speaking at plant society conferences and conventions throughout the United States, corresponding with succulent growers from England to New Zealand and presenting programs to groups in the Portland metropolitan area.

She speaks to church and youth groups, convalescent home and care center residents, garden clubs and plant societies. Her talks range from an introduction to succulents to propagation to judging succulent plant shows. She also gives lessons on grafting, but limits the class to two people.

"Greenhouses are made for plants, not people," she explains.

"I limit (speaking engagements) to two a week because my correspondence takes up so much time," she says.

She figures she spends more time in front of a computer than she does in her greenhouses. But her heart is in those greenhouses, especially the two devoted to research.

"This is the fun area," she says with a sigh. "This is where I like to be."

Row upon row of succulents thrive under her care. Point to any one of the hundreds of plants and she can tell you all about it: its variety and species, what its blooms look like, any mutations in its form and, in many cases, how old it is. She carefully notes anything unusual about the plant for future reference.

Once the plants are well established, say six or seven years old, she moves them to the sale greenhouse. Most are priced very low — \$1.50 to \$3.50 — although a few very large cactuses sell for \$17 or \$18.

She sells her plants only to retail, never to wholesale, customers.

"These are like puppies," she says. "I want to know the owner."

She also trades succulents with other collectors.

"The object is to get them into people's collections so they can enjoy them and that plant lives on."

If problems arise, Spaete dons her plant-doctor hat. She gets calls all the time asking what to do about this or that. If she cannot cure a plant's ill, she refers its owner to another specialist.

Succulents make good houseplants because they require little care, she says. They just need a little water and a good feeding schedule.

"If you have to go away, when you come back your plants will welcome you with open arms instead of drooping."

Spaete became interested in succulents because of their variety.

"You can have a lot of them without having them look alike," she says.

She began growing the plants "seriously" about seven years ago. But even before that, she was known as the "plant lady," she says. She has been at it so long she no longer can

remember how her hobby-turned-business started.

"It seems like there's just always been plants," she says, laughing.

Spaete's business, Plants by Peg, is located in Boring. It is operated out of her home and is open only when she is available.



Peg Spaete

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