

AUTUMN CHEER



In the garden with Wendy Matheson

September – the beginning of one of my favourite times of the year. Not least for the fact that the garden is more relaxed – the fight to keep your plants deadheaded, watered and producing has eased. However, new tasks await as late summer appears. We will now busy ourselves with the excitement of sowing, planting and plotting for both the winter ahead and next spring.

Meanwhile, autumnal fruitfulness in the orchard and kitchen garden provide bountiful harvests. Cool, damp evenings encourage rot and botrytis, so keep picking and harvesting. Bottle, pickle and jam where you can and continue to pick dahlias and sweet peas which will keep flowering up until the frosts.

Recycle old compost, adding some new for re-sowings of winter lettuce, spinach and chervil. After at least two good crops discard the compost and use to add to any beds which need topping up.

The combination of warm ground and the promise of rain makes this a perfect season for planting perennials and container grown shrubs. Their roots will become established before the onset of winter and aid a quicker start to the next growing season.

Divide perennials now and next month. Reduce the top growth by two thirds, lift clumps and prise apart with two forks. Take only the strongest growth from the outside of the clump, discard the eldest and replant in ground improved by compost and water well. The biggest exception to this is grasses which shouldn't be divided until the spring.

A few of my favourite things!

A selection of tried and tested September plants grown in the Boath House gardens and several clients' gardens:

Helenium "moerheim beauty"

Aster "frikartii"

Monarda "didyma"

Echinacea "pallida" and "purpurea"

Nicotiana "lime green"

Soak container grown plants in a bucket of water before planting; soak until the bubbles stop rising to the surface.

This is the best time for planting evergreens, however Mediterranean herbs such as lavender and rosemary do better if their roots are in contact with ground earlier to enable their winter foliage to draw goodness from the soil.

With the warmth in the ground, September and October make the best months for planting bulbs. A general rule of thumb is to plant bulbs in free draining soil two and a half times their own depth.

One of the few exceptions to this is the *Fritillaria meleagris* (snake's head fritillary) which does best if planted in damp (not waterlogged) soil to a depth of 15–20cm. If indoor space allows pot up some narcissus "Paperwhite" for



great winter colour and fragrance as well as some bold coloured hippiastrum for fun colour indoors at Christmas. When choosing bulbs look for the firm and plump and avoid planting any with obvious decay. If ordering larger quantities of bulbs, look at the websites mentioned below.

If you haven't ordered or purchased your bulbs yet, get a wriggle on! Good suppliers run out fast. When receiving your bulbs make sure you prioritise the woodlanders such as anemone, dog toothed violets and trillium which should arrive in moistened compost.

Unpack other "dry" bulbs such as camassia, tulips and narcissus and leave in a cool, airy place away from mice until you have a chance to plant. As cooler nights draw in ease up on the watering of containers and bring in tender plants and houseplants by the end of the month.

If you need more bulbs than your local garden centre can provide or wish to research what is available visit these websites for bulk orders of bulbs:

www.jacquesarmand.com

www.jparkers.co.uk

Lawns are still in need of maintenance and require some care and attention before the winter months begin. Reduce the height on the mower as the grass will be slowing in growth and more susceptible to wear. Rake out any thatch, prick the ground and dress with weed free topsoil. Over-sow now with grass seed and rope off until established.

Give them a pre-winter treat of a feed high in potassium. If a meadow is in your plans for a lawn replacement, one option is to over sow now with a wild flower mix rich

in yellow rattle which is a semi-parasitic plant of grass, allowing the new wild flower seeds to develop.

On the subject of seed, now is a great time to collect seed of perennials and annuals that will be used next year. Hardy annuals such as poppies and calendula can be re-sown in situ. Remember that some seed doesn't always come true, such as sweet peas. Dry the seed naturally, spreading on newspaper in a dry atmosphere, store in a sealed container in a fridge or a cool room.

On writing this we are unsure what weather September will bring, having had a pretty wet and cold summer. If the great god of gardening should be smiling down on us and we are lucky enough to have a late Indian summer the asters, sedum and rudbeckias will keep colour in the garden for another couple of months and providing help for our nectar-feeding insects. Staking may well be necessary in order to survive the onslaught of rain.

Replant containers with a winter wardrobe replenishing compost and scattering a slow release fertiliser. Pansies, violas and repeat flowering wallflowers give a splash of colour.

Give greenhouse protection to half hardy perennials such as penstemon, pelargonium and fuchsia after giving them a chop and potting up.

This could also be the last chance to prune back hedges before the threat of frosts.

CONTACT WENDY

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