

Autumn in the Garden

by Julie Segerstrom

Autumn is the time when it's finally a pleasure to work outdoors. Plants, barely noticed before, burst into bloom. Asters, chrysanthemums and sages are in their glory. Roses and zinnias are very happy this time of year.

There's plenty to do outside as the growing season slows down, cleaning up and preparing for the coming seasons, and planning for future gardens. Now is a great time to reinvigorate the soil.

By choosing natives and adapted plants loved by insects and birds, you can attract and feed wildlife in your garden. The right plant for the right place creates a garden that coexists naturally, with less effort, with our unique climate and weather patterns.

Now is the time to plant spring flowering bulbs. Surprisingly, some bulbs are deer resistant; examples include ranunculus, anemone, allium, grape hyacinths and snowdrops. If digging the proper depth is difficult in the hard ground, try planting seeds. After rich garden soil and compost have been raked in, wildflower and poppy seeds can be broadcast before the rains of winter. Although weeds will have to be removed, there's a huge reward that comes from planting seeds. I usually wait until late November to either set out bulbs or plant seeds in the Columbia area. Please judge the appropriate planting time for your own elevation and microclimate.

Fall is the time to seed winter vegetables such as broccoli, snow peas, and onions. Lettuces, radishes, carrots and beets also enjoy the cooler temperatures and will keep coming as the winter progresses. Leafy greens to stir fry are also meant for this weather. In addition, remember to plant winter color now before the temperatures drop. Pansies, snapdragons and primroses are always favorites.

Restore your garden soil during these autumn days. Leaves that have begun to drop can be saved for compost or mulch. (If there is disease in your plants, such as black spot on roses, throw away the leaves to prevent disease the next season.)

Normally, fallen leaves are a blessing for plants. When used as mulch, leaves prevent weeds from growing. They collect and distribute rain water, preventing erosion. Leaf mulch insulates plants from either cold or hot temperatures. Leaves also add organic matter to the soil as they decompose and should never be thought of as a nuisance.

A wise gardener does not get rid of leaves or burn them, but sometimes imports more leaves! If the types of leaves on your property are too large to easily break down, consider raking them up and chopping them into mulch with a weed eater set into a trash can. Fall is the time to add a nice layer of compost or leaf mulch around the roots of larger shrubs and plants.

Autumn is the time to jumpstart your lawn for spring. Feeding your grass now helps it recover from the stresses of summer and replenishes it for the next growing season in spring. Planting a new lawn or overseeding bare spots is best done in fall.

In our climate, lawns require lots of water and work. Now is the time to make your lawn smaller to help save energy (your own) and water. Add more trees and shrubs to cool things down—and they require less water. Plant trees and shrubs now while the soil temperatures are still warm and the air is cool, a perfect way to start out new growth.

Growing natives is one of the things you begin to appreciate more and more when you have gardened for a long while. The more you work in the garden, the simpler you want the job to be. Natives fit the bill. They like our climate and once established are used to having less water, fertilizer and pesticides. They provide food and shelter for native insects and birds. Besides the ease of care once established, natives are simply beautiful. Blue ceanothus, red California fuchsia, golden deer grass, and magenta redbud are all examples of brilliant color that natives bring to the garden. Fall is the best time to plant natives. Autumn is a season of action in the garden. And it's great to be outside!

Julie Segerstrom has been a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County since 1996. She's still learning how to 'master' the garden, and loves growing natives, edible flowers and fresh vegetables.