Absence Makes the Garden Wander

by Peggy Sullivan, UC Master Gardener

After an extended absence from home this summer, I curiously wondered what I would find in our late-September garden. As we pulled into the driveway, the first thing I saw was a second bloom on the roses. Oh, what a welcome sight! Nearby, the purple Mexican sage intermingled with yellow euryopsis daisies and red salvia. This view brought a smile to my face.

I decided to wait until the next morning to make my "rounds" to assess the garden. I mentally prepared myself for the onslaught of weeds in our absence and I braced myself as I started down the garden path. At first all I could see were masses of vigorous weeds, bird-planted tree seedlings in flowerbeds, September's arrival of whiteflies, uninvited morning glory twining through bushes, errant vines reaching beyond the confines of their appointed trellises, and bermudagrass which had invaded the flower borders. Maple trees and dogwoods showed leaf burn from the heat, and dust coated every leaf of every bush.

I plunked myself down on a chair, feeling a bit overwhelmed. After a few moments I arose and began walking once again, reminding myself to concentrate on all the good things that had begun to surface in the garden after the summer's record heat had subsided. I stopped at the herb garden and picked a few sprigs of lavender to carry along on my walk, hoping that their glorious scent would be calming.

An overnight rainfall had softened the air, the wind had spread a blanket of pine needles over the ground, and the clouds kept the sun at bay. All the house plants which I had moved into the range of the sprinklers during our absence had thrived. Basil and oregano were abundant in the herb garden. I chuckled to myself as I looked up at a blue jay hanging upside down on one of our giant sunflower plants, trying to harvest seeds for lunch. A little garden entertainment lifts the spirit!

Fall blooming perennials accented corners of the garden. Half of the mums, which I had planted last fall, had survived the summer heat and were ready to pop open. Alstromeria, calla lilies, and bachelor buttons, which had all receded into the ground during the summer heat, were sending up fresh new growth. Salvia, cape plumbago, and true geraniums were dressed in purples and blues. Yellow and red lantana was making its fall showing, and the "Yesterday-Today-and-Tomorrow" had spread here-there-and-everywhere.

Fall blooming trees were draped in color. The white rose of Sharon, crape myrtles and butterfly bushes were beaconing butterflies and bees. I realized that I would be seeing autumn leaf colors on the ginkgo, Chinese pistachio, and maple trees within weeks.

Fall bulbs were displaying their long-awaited blooms. Tall elegant white Japanese anemonies were waving in the breeze, canna lilies sported their red "flags", and tuberous begonias were adding cheer to a patio pot. Another serendipity moment caught my breath as I rounded a corner and saw a cluster of leafless spider lilies reaching upward in clusters of red.

By the time I had finished my walk, I was feeling more hopeful. I said to myself "I can do this!"

I made a plan. I will deadhead the roses and other annuals, knowing that there will be the reward of more blossoms. After conquering the weeds, my other reward will be a trip to the nursery. I'm sure I can find, among other garden temptations, some replacement mums in full bloom, and I'll pick up some bulbs to plant for color next spring. After all, one of the best times to plant is in October, which is one of the best times to be living in this great valley.

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