



FALL: It's Time to Plant!

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener

Yippee! Fall is finally here! It was so hot this summer that gardening was hardly any fun at all. If you've been waiting to install a new landscape or spruce up your old one NOW is the time to get it done. Make a list, head to the nursery, shop until you drop, and then return home to turn your yard into a Central Valley paradise.

October is the best planting month of the year around here. Many kinds of bulbs, flowers, herbs, shrubs, trees, vegetables and lawns perform better when planted in the fall rather than the spring. The riskier plants for fall planting are subtropical and tropical plants, like citrus, palms, and bird of paradise...they are best planted in the spring to avoid the danger of frost in their first year.

Why is fall planting better than spring?

Well it is not that it is better, but it is easier to get plants to establish in a landscape. Less work and less water are needed and the success is more visibly rewarding. Because days are becoming shorter and average temperatures are dropping the plant does not need to spend all of its energy trying to cool off. Instead the energy goes to promote growth, especially root growth. Planting in fall allows plants to develop a stronger root system and become well-established in the ground over the winter months. They will be ready to grow next spring and they will perform better through the summer heat. The really good news is that the winter rains and fog will provide most of the watering for you!

So what do you plant now?

Cool season (winter) Annuals – We recommend building a base of perennial plants in your garden and using annuals for “pretty spots of color”. Cool season annuals are planted in the fall and flower through early spring. Calendulas, columbines, foxgloves, Iceland poppies, lobelia, Love-in-a-mist, nemesia, pansies, primrose, snapdragons, sweet peas, and sweet Williams, and violas, to name a few. Avoid planting warm season annuals like impatiens, marigolds, vinca (Madagascar periwinkle), and zinnia, etc., since their flowering season is drawing to a close.



Allow space between plants so they can grow to full size.



Fall is the season to plant winter and spring annual color.

Herbaceous Perennials – These plants flower once or twice a year and live for several years. Some die back in winter and push new growth in spring. Be careful with spacing perennials, many people make the mistake of crowding them together. They will be with you for years and sometimes do not reach their full size in the first year. The selection of perennials is overwhelming. There are oodles of sizes, shapes, textures, and flower colors to choose from. Nurseries are brimming with the “tried and true” and showcasing new varieties all the time.

CA Native Plants – Many people think that drought tolerant natives are hard to grow because they plant them in spring and then over water them in summer. Native plants are acclimated to our dry summers and often times their roots rot when watered too heavily in summer. By planting in the fall your success rate with drought tolerant natives is guaranteed to rise. There are many asters, CA fuchsias, ceanothus, columbines, coral bells, penstemons, salvias, and ornamental grasses that will thrive in our landscapes.



There are many drought tolerant perennials available.

Shrubs and Trees – Most landscape trees and shrubs are best planted in fall. If you want to plant deciduous landscape trees with fall color, then shop for them, while their leaves are turning, so that you pick a good specimen. Be sure to dig the hole at least twice as wide as the rootball and only as deep. Plant a little high to make sure that water drains away from the trunk. Visit our website (cetulare.ucdavis.edu, click on Master Gardener, local information, landscape trees) and look for our recommended list of deciduous and evergreen trees. We also have a list of trees that can be problematic and/or require additional caution before planting. Fruit trees can be planted bare root in the dead of winter.



Shop the nursery for tree specimens with good fall color.

Lawns – Now is a good time sod or seed new fescue lawns and patch existing ones. Bermuda lawns are often overseeded with ryegrass in October, but if you want to conserve water, then just let your Bermuda lawn go dormant this year.

Vegetables and Herbs – It is time to plant cool season vegetables, like broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, lettuce, onions, beets, rutabaga, spinach, and turnips. Many herbs are perennials like chives, lavender, mint, oregano, rosemary, sage and thyme and benefit from a fall planting. Now is not the time to seed or transplant basil, but you can seed cilantro and parsley for a late fall crop. You can even seed wild flowers and poppies right where you want them to grow.

So take advantage of the wonderful fall weather and get your garden ready to grow!

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