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In My Garden - September 2009

by Betty Coffelt, UC Master Gardener

Are you starting to feel fall in the air? Me either! It is true that the days are getting shorter, but they are still plenty hot. Luckily we know that cooler weather is not too far off, which also signals the fall planting and gardening season. Early September mornings are a good time to be outside again.

Last week I laid out the last of my grapes for raisins. They are drying nicely and will be ready to put up in the cupboard about mid month. I just need to be on the lookout for a surprise rain shower.

While sitting on the veranda yesterday, I noticed hummingbirds working the salvias and other trumpet shaped flowers. One of their favorites at my house is the dark purple flower of the Mexican Petunia (Ruellia brittoniana). There are a number of species called Mexican petunias, or wild petunias, but these are not related to the typical garden petunia at all and worms and caterpillars are not a problem. Ruellia is a genus of very hardy, well-adapted flowers. They are perennials that thrive in our summer heat and, as the seed pods dry, they spring open, casting seeds several feet. With a high germination rate, small colonies can spread fairly rapidly. For this reason they are sometime considered invasive in the garden.

An individual plant can also be aggressive as it sends up new shoots from the roots and continues to enlarge. One method I use to deal with aggressive plants is to not plant them in the soil, but instead plant them in a 5 gallon bucket (or nursery pot) with drain holes drilled in the bottom. Then I sink the bucket in the ground with the top at ground level. They get watered with everything else and the pot lasts in the ground about 5 years. The bucket keeps the Ruellia plant contained and the tiny drain holes keep it from sending up new plants. By the end of the season it will be over 5' tall. It has beautiful 2" purple flowers that open each morning about 5 am fall off each evening. It blooms each and every day until frost. In early spring I'll cut it back to a foot tall. I also use this system with some grasses that are invasive and asparagus ferns. I like asparagus ferns but they can get out of control easily. By planting them in buckets and sinking them in the ground they are easy to maintain.

By the end of this month my early chrysanthemums will be flowering. They are mainly cushion mums and are fairly short, only reaching 18-inches tall. The majority of my "mums" fall into the "spiders", "spoons" or "decorative" categories, which makes them excellent choices for cut flowers in vases. Even though I cut them back 4 to 5 times over the summer, they will still grow quite tall to 4-5 feet. I quit cutting them back in early July and have since just kept them tied up as they grow. Most of them produce a heavy crop of flowers and need to be securely staked. You can almost bet on it raining, while the mid to late bloomers are in full flower. If they aren't staked, the rain will pound them to the ground. Since they only bloom once a year, and since they are truly showy, it is worth the time to stake them so you can enjoy them.

Another plant that shows plenty of color in hot summer months besides the common crape myrtles and oleanders are sedums. These succulent perennials are great for the late summer and fall garden and come in a range of heights and colors. I have several yellow green ground covers that are only 5" tall, while the immensely popular "Autumn Joy" is a tall variety with large pink flower heads. It starts by producing green broccoli-like buds in mid-summer, which gradually open into enormous dusty-pink flower heads, finally deepening to rich bronzy-red. Even the dead flower heads have good winter effect. In rich soils, plants may be pinched in June to prevent floppiness. You can usually find it in garden centers.

If you would like to plant a tree this fall and you want fall leaf color to be a deciding purchasing factor, then September is the time to start surveying the nurseries. The variety of leaf color within a species is amazing and surprising. Be sure to spend some time digging the perfect planting hole (one that is as deep as the rootball and at least twice as wide as the pot. Plant slightly higher than the soil level in the plant container and keep water away from the tree trunk.
With fall on the way it is time to consider any landscape changes that are needed in your yard. The Master Gardeners may be able to help you with some of these decisions or answer any gardening and pest management questions that you have. We will be visiting several nurseries and garden centers on Saturday mornings from mid September through Oct 3rd from 10am – 1 pm. Look for us at Luis' Nursery, Leo's Nursery, Mid Valley Trees, Hofman's Nursery, Sierra Garden Center, the Home Depot in Porterville and the Home Depot in Tulare. We love to talk plants, so be sure to ask us your gardening questions.

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