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In my Garden – October 2009

by Betty Coffelt, UC Master Gardener

Finally some cooler weather has arrived. As nights get longer and temperatures cool, your landscape will need less water. However trees should be watered deeply one more time as they are storing food for next year's growth, and then their leaves will fall.

Fall is a great time to tidy up plants in the garden. Many plants need a little refreshing and just pulling off dead leaves or clipping old growth is enough to give them a whole new look. Hellebores, sages, and calla lilies, which are producing new growth, show off well when they are cleaned up a bit. Chrysanthemums are getting ready to burst out in bloom.

If some garden plants were yellow and chlorotic all summer, foliar feed them with an iron chelate fertilizer. It is still warm enough for the plants to take up the iron before winter and look good next spring. Mix the fertilizer and use either a hose end sprayer or watering can and saturate the leaves to the point of runoff. You can also use this time to fertilize plants that are setting buds such as camellias, gardenias, and azaleas. I've tried this on several of my plants and they look so much better in the early spring.

Have you ever planted a fall garden? Plants are available now at nurseries. You don't have to have a big garden area to enjoy some winter vegetables. Think about edging your flower bed with parsley or planting a few red cabbages or spinach in with your flowers. Use your imagination. All you need is at least 6 hours of sun and vegetables and herbs will do very well.

In my garden I am still harvesting okra, peppers, and three kinds of tomatoes, but the old vines are going to the compost pile. I will plant globe onions and elephant garlic early next month, so I am cleaning out the beans to make space for them. Later this month or early next I'll spread composted manure on the remainder of the veggie garden and let it rest for the season.

My two avocado trees are performing well: Grande avocadoes are ready now and the Zutanos will be ready next month. So unless it gets really cold we will have avocadoes for the next 6 months.

Grasshoppers were a big nuisance this summer. They started chomping on the tomatoes in late August and have just now slowed down. They are easy to get early in the mornings when it is still cool and they don't move as fast. They seem to hang out in the rosemary, but don't cause as much damage there.

October is a great planting and transplanting month. Take a walk around your yard and decide if some of your plants need to be re-arranged. Plants that are too close together or grew larger than you expected or just don't match those that surround them, can easily be transplanted this month. Water them well, wait a couple of days, and then dig as much root ball as possible. Have the hole ready where you want to transplant them and dig it slightly larger than the root ball. In advance of transplanting fill the new hole with water and let it soak in, then transplant at the same level in the soil as it was originally planted. Fill the hole with water again and put moist dirt around as the water goes down. Add amendments sparingly, if at all. Finally firm the soil around the base of the transplanted plant. Do not let it dry out. Usually some light irrigation for a couple of days is all that is needed and then winter keeps it moist enough.

Now is the time to start preparing to protect sensitive plants for the winter. Let them enjoy the mild fall, but be prepared to act swiftly when a cold spell comes. I bring a few plants inside to an unheated room each winter, but before I do I check them all very carefully for signs of insects. You don't want to bring bugs into a warm area for the winter as they will rapidly reproduce.

For special plants with troublesome amounts of insects (e.g. begonias loaded with whiteflies) adding a systemic insecticide to the soil a few weeks before bringing them indoors is worth it. In a warm spot in my garden I created a plastic covered area, where I leave other plants to brave the cold. Even my orchids spend the winter here and bloom well each year.

Now don't forget to plant some vegetables, herbs, and easy to grow colorful plants in your flower beds this fall. You'll want to eat healthy and admire their beauty during the cold winter months. Happy Gardening!

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