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It's time to prepare your October garden checklist

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



October is the perfect time to sow spring wildflower seeds such as baby blue eyes, (*Nemophila*), growing above with African daisies (*Osterspermum*), along West Side Road in the Dry Creek Valley. Photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat

If this year's Old Farmer's Almanac predictions prove true, October will offer lower temperatures and the promise of rain, although the month opened with a few unseasonable scorchers. However it turns out, we know for certain there will be fewer daylight hours.

Once rains begin and the ground is moist, it will be ideal planting time in Sonoma and Napa counties. While the soil is still warm, roots on new plants begin to take hold and boost growth even as days cool down.

Early October is the perfect time to plan and implement the addition of native plants to local gardens. California natives increase biodiversity in our landscape and support

local ecosystems most efficiently. When planning, keep in mind a key principle of sustainable gardening: “right plant, right place.”

Check that the location can accommodate both the plant’s size at maturity and its sun exposure requirements. You might want to look through our page on California natives bit.ly/44Ov237 and pick the appropriate plants for your situation.

If you planted a fall/winter veggie garden, it’s not too late to add a few more cool-weather crops, such as bok choy, peas, radishes and salad greens. Vegetable seeds can go into the ground in late July, August or September in order to give plants a good start during these warmer months. Now in October, you can plant vegetable starts.



Young pea pods on a green plant. Pea pods ripening in the garden on a sunny day. Beauty in nature.

This is an ideal time to plant garlic. Most local nurseries carry a variety of garlic bulbs grown specifically for home gardens. To plant garlic, separate each clove from the bulb and plant the pointy side up, 4–6 inches apart and 2–3 inches deep. While you’re at the nursery, pickup some late-winter and early-spring blooming bulbs like daffodils and tulips. Also consider adding native plant bulbs to your garden. See our recent Press Democrat article on native bulbs and their many benefits at bit.ly/4eeXjUH.

If you don’t plan to have a fall/winter veggie garden this year, think about planting cover crops. Cover crops add nitrogen and organic matter, improve the soil tilth and water penetration and help mitigate diseases related to crop rotation. Some options

for cover crops include fava beans, red clover and field peas. Garden stores and catalogs usually have a supply of cover crop seeds.

Plant soon so the seeds have a chance to sprout while there's still sufficient daylight. Allow the cover crops to grow until late winter or early spring next year, then cut down the crop just as flower buds begin to form, leaving the roots in the soil.

The tops can be simply chopped and dropped or put in your compost pile. Afterward, top the garden with two to three inches of compost and allow it to lay fallow until you are ready to plant your spring or summer garden.

Sow wildflower seeds

October is a good time to sow California wildflower seeds. Prepare a site in your garden a week or two before you plan to sow seeds. First, remove any weeds and grass that can compete with new wildflower seedlings. After you have removed the existing vegetation, loosen the soil to a depth of no more than 1 to 2 inches to keep the dormant weeds covered, and water well.

After 2 weeks or so, remove any new weeds that have sprouted. Before sowing the seeds, moisten the soil thoroughly. Mix the wildflower seeds with horticultural sand or vermiculite to make spreading easier.

Don't bury the seeds or they won't sprout. Instead, scatter seed by hand or use a seed dispersal tool to ensure even distribution. Lightly rake or sprinkle the seeded area but avoid covering seeds completely. You can also press the seed in with a piece of cardboard. Keep the area moist, but not saturated, until seeds germinate. If all goes well, the fall and winter rains will provide enough moisture. During drought years, be prepared to provide supplemental irrigation after seeding and throughout the bloom period.

Some of our favorite annual wildflowers that do well in most of the Wine Country and will reseed in successive years are Baby blue-eyes (*Nemophila menziesii*), Blue field gilia (*Gilia capitata*), California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*), Sky lupine (*Lupinus nanus*), Sonoma Clarkia (*Clarkia gracilis* ssp. *Sonomensis*) and Chinese houses, or Pagodas (*Collinsia heterophylla*).

For more in-depth information on fall food gardening basics, California native plants, planting California wildflowers and creating resilient landscapes, join Sonoma County Master Gardeners at our Children's Jamboree and Fall Festival 2024 on Sunday, Oct. 20, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at our Los Guilicos Demonstration and Teaching Garden, 1 Los Guilicos Road, Santa Rosa.

This free event will feature a variety of fun, educational activities for children, information tables and presentations and demonstrations geared toward adult home gardeners.

There will also be a pop-up succulent sale (cash or check only). For more information and to register for this event visit our website at sonomamg.ucanr.edu.

Contributors to this week's column were Diane Judd and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.