

The Garden in October

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturalist

October in the garden is so quintessentially autumnal for me. Mornings are cool and drippy with dew (if not down right soggy from the rain the night before) and spider webs are draped artfully from shrub to tree, each strand beaded with moisture. Colors stand out vividly despite being shrouded in mist and fog, and the blades and tassels of grasses sigh with the slightest breeze. The songbirds have mostly moved on by now and are replaced by the full silence of fall. It's sort of like the deafening silence of a room once the party is over and the guests have all gone home. Don't allow the winding down to fool you, though. There's a lot to do in the garden before the first frost hits and winter sets in for the long haul.

In the ornamental garden:

- Pull those weeds you've been ignoring! With the return of the rainy season upon us, the soil is refreshed and yields the roots of weeds more easily than dry soil.
- Cut back any perennials that are tired looking or beginning to go dormant, especially spring blooming herbaceous perennials like peonies, columbine, and baptisia. I like to leave perennials like asters, echinacea, and rudbeckia because they are still showing a bit of color. When the petals have finally faded and fallen away, the seed heads are excellent forage for wild birds.
- Leave your grasses alone for now. They have a very long season of interest that extends clear into winter.
- Spread compost or bark as a mulch, being careful not to put it up against the trunks of trees and shrubs. Mulching in the fall is an excellent way to protect plants during the winter, plus it adds organic matter to the soil and helps keep weeds under control. On top of all that, it looks fresh and beautiful!
- Rake fallen leaves. If you're lucky enough to have a maple, oak, or other deciduous trees in your yard (or your neighbor's yard), then you have a fabulous source of FREE MULCH! This is a valuable resource. If the leaves are large (like our native big leaf maple) then you may want to chop them up a bit so they decompose faster, and also so they don't clump together and create a slimy, slippery mat. Adding leaves in the garden - both ornamental and vegetable - will add minerals and organic matter to the soil, while at the same time protecting plants and keeping down weeds. Just be sure the leaves you use are not diseased or buggy. Also steer clear of walnut leaves as they contain growth inhibitors that prevent seed germination and stunt the growth of existing trees and shrubs.
- October is a great time to move or divide perennials. It's also a good time to move small shrubs or trees if you've decided they're not where you'd like them after all. They'll have all winter to establish new roots to support next season's growth.
- Empty summer planters and hanging baskets. Clean and store your pots for next year, or refill them with fall and winter in mind.
- If your hydrangeas are beginning to turn the wrong color (i.e. blue to pink, or more commonly pink to blue), now is a really good time to adjust your soil pH for next year's flowers. If you want electric blue flowers, add aluminum sulfate. If you want pink flowers, add lime. Hydrangeas have the amazing ability to change color depending on the soil pH and sometimes will have both pink and blue flowers on the same plant! If you've never had your soil tested, it's not a bad idea to do so before you do too much soil tinkering. The WSU extension agency will be able to steer you in the right direction, or you can pick up a home pH test kit at the Nursery. The kits aren't exact science, but they will give you an idea.

- Plant bulbs! We've got our best selection in at the nursery. Just think of those bright cheerful colors after a long, grey winter. You'll be so glad you went through the trouble of digging all those little holes! If you live in deer or bunny country, there are some great bulb varieties that the critters will usually leave alone, such as Allium, Fritillaria, Scilla, Galanthus (snowdrops), and Erythronium (tooth violet). In fact, because the bulbs of Fritillaria are so stinky, they actually work to repel ground dwellers like moles and voles.
- Start paperwhites in pots indoors for flowers and fragrance around Thanksgiving. We have 3 varieties to choose from, including a new one called 'Ariel', which is supposed to have a more compact growth habit. Paperwhites usually take about six weeks from time of planting until bud and bloom. Plant successively for cheerful indoor color all winter long. Hyacinths also force well. Forced bulbs make wonderful hostess gifts for the holidays, so plant lots and plan to give some away!
- Select Amaryllis bulbs. We have a great selection to choose from by the end of October. They take a little longer to bloom than paperwhites, usually 8-10 weeks, so make sure to leave enough time before the holidays.
- Don't forget about the birds! Empty out your bird feeders and give them a good cleaning if you haven't done so in a while. Make sure to clean bird baths too, and keep them full.

In the veggie garden:

- Harvest late apples, pears, and Asian pears.
- Pick the rest of your tomatoes. This was a fabulous year for tomatoes, wasn't it?! I'm a little sorry to see it end.
- Pull weeds and any veggie plants that are through producing.
- Sometime towards the end of October is the time to plant garlic. Mulch with straw or leaves. When you start to see the little green shoots peeking out, remove the mulch and side dress with a slow release vegetable fertilizer.
- Generously thin any seedlings that were sown in September. It's important that overwintering veggies get good air circulation to help with disease resistance.
- If you have veggie beds that are laying fallow this winter and you didn't get around to sowing a cover crop, make sure to use a mulch of some sort to help protect against compaction from the pounding rain and erosion of vital nutrients. Straw (NOT hay) is excellent, as are fallen leaves.

Although the party that is summer is now over, there's still a lot to look forward to in the garden. There's a change of scenery which gives us a different perspective and allows us to see what maybe we were missing before. Enjoy your new view!



About the author:

Rachel has been gardening since childhood, thanks to her mom, and has been part of the team at Christianson's since 2002. She's a Certified Professional Horticulturist with a passion for roses and vegetable gardening. Rachel and her family enjoy gardening together and now share their urban garden with a menagerie of ducks, chickens, two cats, and a dog.

*This article was first published in the October 2013 issue of **Garden Notes**, our monthly online newsletter. You can sign up for Garden Notes on the Newsletter page of our website (www.christiansonsnursery.com) or sign up in person the next time you're in the Garden Store at the Nursery.*