

AUTUMN GARDENING TASKS: A LABOR OF LOVE

Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener

Ahhh. September. Warm days, cool nights. Hopefully, you are reading this column, sitting outside, enjoying the fruits (and sights) of your hard labor. Once you've figured out what to do with all of those zucchinis and cucumbers, here are a few early fall tasks on which to focus. I say "tasks," but they're really a labor of love.

Relax and—

- Don't fertilize, as new growth may just be killed off when the frost hits next month.
- Don't deadhead—first, because you're likely to find a few alyssum, zinnia, impatiens, and petunia volunteers peeping up from the mulch or in flower pots next spring. Second, because some plants, such as coneflowers, clematis, brown-eyed Susans, spearmint, sedum, and grasses, offer a winter habitat and food for birds and insects.

Keep on with—

- Weeding—yes, weeding! The more unwanted or invasive plants you can dig up, the fewer weeds you'll have to pull next spring.
- Cleaning up detritus from the garden. Compost those plants that are fading away, or put in yard waste bags those that are mildewed or diseased. **
- Dividing and replanting your spring-flowering plants, summer and fall perennials and bulbs. September and October are even better months than late August was for this task. According to the University of Maryland extension service, perennials planted in the fall often grow larger than when planted at other times of the year, and often bloom the first season. Plus, bulbs especially need that cold overwintering period to bloom well in the spring.
- Keep an eye on those fall flowers, too. Chrysanthemums, fall anemones, and asters may have begun blooming now. Milkweed, the only plant that monarchs use to lay their eggs (look for a single, pinhead sized white egg on the underside of the leaf), may fall prey to tiny aphids. Try to wash the aphids off, or better, remove aphids with alcohol on a Q-tip, while avoiding any caterpillars or eggs.

Begin winter preparations by—

- Preserving bulbs and rhizomes for spring planting. By October, you'll be racing against the frost (more on that next month). Will you let tender perennials die down and buy fresh bulbs/rhizomes in the spring? Here on our little plot of earth, we dig them up in September and October, before frost, carefully searching the soil for the "baby" gladiola bulbs and dahlia and canna rhizomes formed over the summer. Dried for a few days, then dirt shaken from their roots, glads and dahlias go into labeled paper bags and are tucked into a plastic bin in the garage or basement. Cannas are wrapped in newspapers, layered

in a cardboard box, and stored in a cold basement corner. Seeds gathered from zinnias, morning glories (but not the purple ones, which are very invasive), and marigolds, are dried, labeled, and stored in Ziplock sandwich bags.

- Gathering seeds to dry, an easy task. I used to spread the seeds on paper towels. Now, thanks to a family gift, I have a lovely, wide, two-tiered net drying bag that I hang out of the way in an upstairs room. I place the labeled seeds on aluminum pie pans inside the drying bag. Whatever method you choose, once you're sure the seeds are dry, label and store them in plastic or paper bags (I like Ziplock plastic bags to keep out insects) in a cool place. Check our columns next spring for planting seeds, hardening off seedlings, and planting them in permanent locations.
- Cleaning, conditioning and repairing your tools, a task that is both ongoing throughout the year but also a special preparation for winter. You want them to be clean so that they don't spread disease next spring; you want them to be well-conditioned and repaired so that you can use them right away. So, replace worn parts; oil or scrub away dirt and rust, as needed. Remember to pay attention to wooden handles, too.

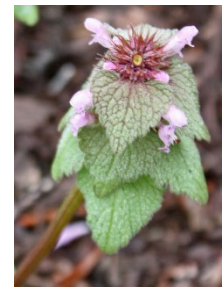
As you probably are aware, Frederick County Master Gardener seminars still are not available. However, for other information about gardening, watch for the Master Gardeners' column in the *Frederick News-Post* on the first Thursday of each month; explore the University of Maryland's Extension web site, <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening>; or call us at 301-600-1596.

Cutlines for photographs; all photos courtesy of the author.



A *male cardinal* perches in a thicket. Such thickets, shrubs, and brush piles provide much-needed winter shelter for both birds and overwintering insects.

Henbit, *Lamium amplexicaule*, also known as *deadnettle*, is a member of the mint family and is found throughout the U.S., but especially in eastern North America. A winter annual, it has a square stem and a fibrous root system. Its top turns from green to purple with age and stems root wherever they touch the soil surface.



A baby *Monarch* (*Danaus plexippus*) caterpillar, less than 1/2-inch long, munches on common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*).

Pictured above is an *Eastern black swallowtail* (*Papilio polyxenes asturias*) caterpillar. The butterfly is found throughout southern Canada and most of the eastern and mid-western United States west to the Rocky Mountains, and southwest into Arizona and northern Mexico.



Aphids feed on and will destroy the milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), the only plant (including several varieties) on which monarchs lay eggs. Wash them off with water or with a Q-tip soaked in alcohol. Warning: be careful not to get alcohol on the monarch caterpillars or eggs.

****Correction to this Master Gardeners' column:**

In the September Master Gardeners' column, we stated that diseased yard waste could go into yard waste bags. Please note that only plants infected with common pathogens like powdery mildew and early blight can be hot-composted (at least 140°F). "Some very destructive diseases, such as boxwood blight and late blight of tomatoes/potatoes, should not be composted at home or at municipal compost operations. These infected plants should be bagged up with household trash and sent to the landfill," according to Dr. Jon Traunfeld, UM Extension.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.

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