The Dog Days Are Barking!

As August approaches even the most dedicated gardeners are beginning to wilt, getting up earlier and earlier before the days heat up enough to bake the joy out of garden work. Sometimes I think you have to be a cousin of Voltaire's incurably optimistic Dr. Pangloss to garden decade after decade. It is not easy having your long-awaited array of glorious daylilies reduced to stalks when the heavy buds vanish into hungry deer. And we do know that if sufficiently hungry, the deer will eat their way through that list of deer-resistant plants. There is also the heartbreak of watching squirrels play soccer with small green tomatoes.

There are solutions to the deer problem. The difficulty is that the simple recipes for the detergent sprays have to be applied with consistency! This one is guaranteed: fill a gallon jug ¾ full of water and add 3 tablespoons each of cayenne pepper, red pepper flakes, garlic powder and cinnamon. Let the jug sit overnight. Strain into a spray bottle and apply. The same generous gardener suggested using a cheese grater on cheap deodorant soap (the red or green ones or other strong smelling ones). Put the gratings in water, shake and spray.

Another garden recipe that may be effective on garden pests is a spray made by putting into a quart sprayer one teaspoon each of vegetable oil, dish detergent and baking soda. Shake and apply. If mildew has troubled your plants you might try a spray made of a small amount of milk plus quite a lot of water.

To add to August doldrums, where are the butterflies? One impromptu plant of Asclepias tuberosa, butterfly weed, has become a chorus of orange along the boxwood foundation planting. Surely a garden designer would issue an "off with their heads!" directive, but butterfly weed puts down a taproot making them difficult to transplant to a more suitable site unless you catch them young.

I loved the swarms of zebra butterflies they always attracted – the black and white so dramatic against the orange. This year bumblebees have tumbled among them but not a butterfly. There are dragonflies, wasps, tiny moths, other winged things and still lots of wildlings to attract them but still no butterflies. Some of my flowers may be technically weeds but they can be reclassified as wildflowers.

Currently I am trying to reduce the number of perennials so that what remains can be mowed and pass for grass. If it is level enough and it covers the soil, it will suffice. Not just the perennials, but some shrubs have to go. A decade or so ago I was admiring a hedge of Caroline allspice and a few seeds found their way into my pocket. The seeds grew and I gave away all but one of the small shrubs. The Calycanthus florida is also called Common sweetshrub and Strawberry shrub. It has 3 to 4 inch shiny oval deep green leaves and a dark red strap-petaled flower that hides under the leaves and yes, it does have a sweet, if faint, fragrance.

After several years it seemed to undergo a metamorphosis and the neat and tidy 6 ft. shrub vanished into a forest of suckers, long erect unbranched stems with leaves as large as a hand. It reminded me of those bright banners screaming for attention along the highway. Whether the top of the original plant was killed by the alternating bitter cold to mild weather or merely crowded out when the suckers were not removed in a timely manner, I do not know. It took a long hot morning to dismantle this structure and tote it to the trash pile. Incidentally that trash pile was once a promising compost pile before it became to huge to turn. There is no way to remove it via truck, burning, a magic potion. Are termites the only solution?

Ethanol again: Corn-to-oil-to-gasoline has been an expensive embarrassment but there may be potential in switch grass and that would be good news since no one needs to eat switch grass. In

Science News Magazine I read of a bacterium that, when tweaked, can ferment the sugary rubble of switch grass to ethanol. This one-step procedure would eliminate the need for expensive plant-digesting processes. The name of the bacterium is Caldicellolosiruptor bescii and it grows in hot springs. This is still a possibility not a reality, but it is always encouraging when science and research expands those possible alternatives to CO2 enhancing fossil fuels.

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