

## The Ghost of Summer Past

Tall and gangly, the stems that once held colorful flower heads now display seeds to feed birds. But we wonder if the birds will carry them off or will a wayward wind result in a wealth of unwanted plants in all the wrong places. This is when the gardener becomes the decider in chief.

One reason for the urge to tidy up the garden is the weather. We are looking for any excuse to remain in the lovely outside when the inside is dominated by the noise of negative news. Outside is a treasure to be explored. We think of summer as the season of rampant bloom but fall can be even prettier in our benign climate with the richness of late roses and early camellias.

Happily there are chores. Many perennials do well if divided now. Not all of them require frequent dividing but if some of your favorites have fewer flowers they may have become overcrowded. In some species, when you fork the plant out of the ground you will notice the center of the plant is hard and dried out and the edges ready to be coaxed away from the old plant and replanted in fresh soil reinforced with a serving of compost.

Some of the plants that may be divided include bearded iris, hosta, daisies, foxgloves (*Digitalis*), black-eyed Susan, (*Rudbeckia*), phlox and ferns. Actually very few of my perennials are so generously fertile that they need dividing: they still need to be multiplying. Phlox are rampant in my garden but not by the enlarged original plant but by prodigious seeding. Phlox tend to be playground bullies.

Not all perennials insist on being divided: some prefer to be left alone. These Garbo plants include bleeding hearts (*Dicentra*), false indigo (*Baptisia*), Helleborus, balloon flower, hardy cyclamen and Virginia bluebells. Fall is the time to move peonies if you have been successful in growing this cold-winter preferring plant. Peonies also prefer a more neutral soil than our generally acidic one, so lime needs to be incorporated into their new spot. They like morning sun and as they don't move easily, lift them with as large amount of soil as you can manage. Also essential in Tidewater is to plant them with the rhizome's small pink eyes at the surface of the soil. If planted deeply, they will not bloom. If this seems too much effort, just leave them and buy new ones. If well situated, they will be there to greet your great grandchildren, an inheritance worth the expense.

About bulbs: they prefer to be planted in cool soil. If the temperature is flirting with 80, wait until November. However buy them immediately or they will be gone! Years ago, planting bulbs was a delight I saved for Christmas vacation and there were no problems due to this stretching of the directions. Lily bulbs differ in that they are not really dormant so must go into the ground as soon as you lay a hand on them.

October is not a good time to prune as the pruning may stimulate new growth that will be vulnerable to death by cold snaps. But as the leaves thin out in fall and you can suddenly see more clearly what you need to do to shape up a shrub, take a chance. Actually if you have retired from those heavier chores a good time to prune is anytime you can find a helper to do it. Pruning is one of those chores made unnecessarily complicated by directives on time and technique. A sharp tool is essential and dead, diseased, and those limbs obviously out of whack can go, the sooner the better. The rest depends on the gardener's choice of shape and size. And as we well know from experience, a lot of pruning results from putting that too vigorous plant in that small space in the first place.

A Reminder

There are a trillion plastic bags used a year: that is two million each and every minute! The amount of energy used to make 12 of these pesky things would drive a car one mile. You probably noticed that California recently banned them. Since so many cultural trends begin in that spectacular state, flimsy plastic bags may be losing their charms.

The oldest ban on them was enacted in Denmark in 1993 and certain types are banned in Africa because they had festooned so many trees. Heavier ones are often taxed there as well. Lots of cities and other places ban them as they are such an expense for municipalities, clogging sewers etc.

So many bag remnants are found in the stomachs of marine species, naturalists have become increasingly concerned. I have as many p.c. correct bags in my car as you probably do and I am ashamed to say I forget them way too often! We do have to do a better job remembering.

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