

Not All Plants Ready to Retire!

Lulled outside by the soft gold light of early November, you may feel the urge to tidy up as a way of staying outside longer. If you are a vegetable gardener, go for it. By doing a thorough cleanup now you prevent the wintering over of the pests and diseases that escaped your vigilance these past months.

If grass has been encroaching into your garden area or you plan to expand the bed next year you can cover the area with cardboard or newspapers six pages thick. To make this makeshift killer-cover more aesthetically pleasing, the lot can be covered in pine straw or mulch. The straw tends to be gone with the wind by spring but most of the heavier mulch will remain. The cardboard and newspaper will dissolve into the soil, giving the new garden improved tilth.

For flower borders, relax and enjoy the late-blooming asters, chrysanthemums, those persistent roses and dancing grasses. Leave the straggling stems holding seeds for the birds. However, it is a good idea to move mulch a few inches away from tree trunks and shrub stems to discourage mice making themselves at home.

It is necessary to tidy up the roses. Dropped foliage may harbor fungus – well, you know the litany- so protect your arms and hands and housekeep the rose bed. Removing the remaining leaves after the last bouquet is good insurance against further infestation and branches waving in strong winter winds can unsettle the roots so those limbs can be shortened to three feet and the arching canes of ‘climbers’ tied to their supports for the winter.

Avoid pruning until late winter. Valentine’s Day, because love and roses go together is a handy reminder that February 14th is time to begin the rejuvenation of your roses. By leaving shrub and perennial cleanup until spring you have an excuse to tour the garden, cutting out a dead branch here, pulling away sodden leaves there and watching for the small promises of coming beauty. For example, the spicebush, *Lindera benzoin* has dropped its last leaf but along the branches are barely visible buds of pale gold, a promise of yellow flowers in late February.

Double Purpose Kale: Because I associate kale with ‘greens’, I have never planted ornamental kale as a feature of a fall garden. The only container I’ve put kale into is the cooking pot. Today I read that we can have the best of both worlds. There are varieties that can grow to harvesting size in a garden display and still provide tasty additions to soup or used as greens. Up until now kale featured in the seed catalogs has been bred for early harvest, tenderness, keeping quality and nutrition but not for beauty! Since we consumers want it all, perhaps future catalogs will have new varieties for both food and fashion.

Kale is wonderfully nutritious and even those red and purple leaves attached to the ornamental kinds have graced a dinner plate as garnish. The November issue of

Better Homes and Gardens lists three tall cultivars that are both ornamental and tasty: 'Winterbor', 'Red Russian', and 'Toscano'.

News to Use: It is not just fish that see a worm as a good thing! Research is reinforcing old-farmer-lore that everything that passes through a worm becomes richer and more beneficial to plant life. It is sort of a lowly alchemy of changing a basic soil to gold?

Just because none of my friends have shared their vermicompost plans with me does not mean that this endeavor inhabits the fringes of garden practice. It could be a coming trend! If we could coax state educators to include scads of questions on the SOLs about the wonderful world of worms, every 11-year old would have a worm science project in the pantry. Our young scientists would be able to tell us about the microorganisms, enzymes, carotenoid content, insect repellants, and minerals in this magic substance. Schools could have huge worm bins in cafeteria pantries being fed uneaten vegetables and, instead of stellar bars of expensive chocolate as a fund raiser, PTAs could sell tidy packages of worm compost to eager gardeners. I am quite sure the computer-adept young could find not merely healthy worms suited to Tidewater, but full instructions on the web.

Tips from Tech: When I asked gardeners about their favorite tools, none of them mentioned 'fit'. But if Mr. G and Mrs. G use the same hoe, does it fit them both? Writing in the Virginia Gardener Newsletter, Diane Relf, Professor Emeritus, Va. Tech Dept of Horticulture, suggests that when you stand next to a long handled tool the top should reach your ear. A too-short handle will cause you to bend over awkwardly and stress your back. I like a fairly short-handled spade with a straight square blade that I can stamp on. If a large shovel is needed, a younger, stronger person is needed to apply it. For normal weeding and planting I use a hand tool because I need to get down close to see what I am doing.