

Gardeners Hit List - October by Teresa Gaffner

October in east Tennessee is an explosion of fall color in our neighborhoods and surrounding hills. Pumpkins decorate front porches with pots of chrysanthemums and fiery red celosia for sale at the entry way of every grocery store. The cold nip in the air is a sign of the coming winter and a change of direction in gardening chores. The month of October is a great time to catch up on garden maintenance, plant trees and bulbs for spring flowers, learn to extend your growing season and to plant seed cover crops to improve soil quality.

GARDEN MAINTENANCE

- Now, when leaves are starting to fall and we can easily see through to inner limbs and branches, is a good time to prune any dead or diseased wood on trees and shrubs. Do not compost any diseased cuttings and be sure to clean and sanitize your tools when you are finished.
- Do a thorough last weeding and cleaning of your garden beds before the cold weather sets in. Every weed you pull now will prevent many more sprouting in the spring.
- Collect seeds from your favorite plants, dry them thoroughly and store in a cool, dry place in paper bags with all pertinent information listed on the outside.
- Cut back and mulch any disease-free tender perennials and plants. This will help keep diseases and pests from setting up in your flowerbeds over the winter season.
- Consider leaving some perennials with seeds to feed local birds and insects that overwinter in our area.

PLANTING NOW FOR SPRING

- There are bulbs available for planting right now in feed, hardware, and big box stores. Daffodils, hyacinths, alliums, crocuses, and tulips are just a few of the many spring blooming varieties that do so well in east Tennessee. See the bottom of this article for a link to a bulb planting guide from the UT Agriculture Institute.
- Autumn is a favorable time to plant deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs as they are in a dormant stage and will be under less stress. Give them a good initial watering after planting and check them periodically through the autumn and winter seasons. Fertilize your newly planted trees and shrubs with a balanced fertilizer as it will give the nutrients time to be absorbed by the roots and made available for growth in the spring. Do not use a nitrogen dominant fertilizer at this time as it could cause new growth that will die back in the winter and compromise the plant's integrity.
- Plant flowering shrubs and trees now to take advantage of winter rains and time to establish themselves. Azaleas, viburnum, dogwoods, and roses fall into this category. Do not prune them until after their first flowering in the spring unless you find dead or diseased branches. Follow the same good practice instructions as listed for the deciduous and evergreen shrubs.
- Planting perennials in the fall will guarantee well established flowers in the spring and summer. Plant them alongside your bulbs for a colorful showpiece next year. Some great perennials for the northeast Tennessee area are Coreopsis, Dianthus, Salvia, Phlox, Sedum and Stonecrop. Plant before the first frost, don't fertilize and be sure to apply mulch at the plant base to help them overwinter. Give them a good initial watering when planting and monitor them to ensure they have enough moisture to encourage root growth.

- There are a few annuals that you can set out now. Seeds or transplants of pansies and violas should be set out before the first frost so they can establish themselves before the freezing winter arrives.
- Plant garlic and shallot bulbs this month for summer harvest. Cover them with a straw mulch for protection from freezing weather.

LAWN CARE

- Although it's not too late to seed the lawn. It is best done in the early fall up to the first two weeks of October.
- Now is also a good time to core, aerate and dethatch your lawn if it is needed.
- Cold season lawn and garden weeds can be treated now. Dandelion, chickweed, and plantain should be addressed now to minimize impact in the spring.

COVER CROPS

- You may not be familiar with cover crops, but they are definitely worth looking into. They are planted when the growing season is over, and their primary job is to improve the soil.
- A cover crop is not harvested but 'plowed under' before planting in the spring. This helps with soil erosion, water retention and control of weeds, insects, and disease.
- Some local east Tennessee cover crops for the home garden are winter rye and various clovers.

EXTENDING GROWING TIMES

- Extending the growing season can be accomplished by using floating row cover materials that can be applied directly onto plants and will improve heat retention in soil and trapped air. Some plants will need support to keep the material off tender growing tips.
- Low tunnels are placed over rows of plants and resemble mini greenhouses. They are built with plastic sheeting or fabric and supported along the rows length by hoops and vented to prevent overheating.
- Growing seasons can also be extended in the early spring by using raised beds that will keep soil warmer and provide better drainage for your seeds and young plants. A bonus is that raised beds lend themselves easily to floating row covers and low tunnels.
- Finally, using dark mulch will help retain heat and moisture in your garden beds.

BEFORE FROST

- October is also the month to bring your potted plants inside, check the soil and under the leaves for any unwanted passengers.
- Bring in any lawn ornaments that are not frost proof. Monitor the weather reports so the first frost can be anticipated.

There is still so much to do in an east Tennessee garden before the first frost. Hopefully, this "hit list" helps you take care of business.

Links to the publications used as references for this article are provided below. They are published by the University of Tennessee and UT Agriculture Institute and contain well researched information pertinent to gardening our area.

Cover crops: <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/w235-i.pdf>

Planting bulbs: <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/D140.pdf>

Extending growing season: <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-F.pdf>

Gardening by the month: <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/w436.pdf>

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.