

FALL TASKS – OCTOBER IS A GOOD TIME TO...

By Maritta Perry Grau, Master Gardener

Finally, after September's hot weather and drenching rains, fall has arrived with comfortable day temps and cool nights, making it easier to anticipate frosts. The *Old Farmer's Almanac* calls for the first frost on October 27, although it warns that we have a 30 percent chance of frost earlier than that date. Just to be safe, I usually figure the first frost of fall for October 15 (and last one in spring, May 15).

With those dates in mind, my husband and I have begun readying our gardens for the winter. We have a lot of chores to do! October is a good time to...

Clean up the vegetable garden

If you haven't done so already, pull up and compost those tomato plants. Whatever small tomatoes are developing now probably won't ripen before frost. Or you could try an old-time storage method: my grandmother used to wrap green tomatoes in quarter sheets of newsprint and store them in a single layer in her cold cellar to keep for making fried green tomatoes. Unfortunately, when I attempted to save end-of-season tomatoes, most just rotted and made an awful, stinking mess. Perhaps the basement was not as cold as a cellar dug out of the hillside in Appalachia.

Remove any diseased plants or debris from the garden, but be sure to dispose of this material in yard waste bags, rather than in compost. For the rest of the garden debris, you can rake the beds bare, although that deprives the soil of being enriched for the next growing season. Instead, consider other options: one, leave plant stalks and other vegetative debris in the garden to be tilled into the soil next spring. By doing so, you provide butterflies and other insects with stalks in which they can deposit overwintering eggs and places under garden debris where insects and birds can shelter during winter storms.

A second option is, before the end of October, to plant a cover crop, such as winter rye, hairy vetch, red clover, oats, or buckwheat, on your vegetable garden bed, just like the big kids have done for years on acres and acres of farms. These seeds grow quickly, will help fix nutrients in the soil, and can be tilled back into the soil next spring.

A third option is keeping an out-of-the-way corner of your yard as a place to store pruning leftovers and garden debris. Some people don't like the messy look of such piles of garden debris, but they do provide winter shelter for insects, birds, and other wild creatures. Rather than being lazy, you are being a good steward of the earth!

Divide perennials and bulbs

October is also a great time of year to divide perennials and spring bulbs. After some big yard projects, we had several huge clumps of lirioppe, peonies, and irises, and masses of tulips and daffodils that we had to divide and replant. We're also digging up some day lilies and swamp mallow to transplant. And while we're at it, we'll take up dahlias, cannas, elephant ears, etc., and tuck them away in basement or garage. These tender plants are too sensitive to cold to overwinter in our mid-Maryland soil.

Mow to nourish the soil

If you're in the market for a new lawn mower, consider a mulching mower, which will shred the grass into tiny pieces. Shredding has a twofold purpose—one, the cut grass shades the soil, preventing too many weeds from taking over; and two, the “mulched” grass nourishes the soil as it rots into the ground.

Bring in a spot of color

Finally, pot up plants you want to overwinter for next spring. Just a few plants you can bring indoors include: Geraniums; some herbs, such as chives, parsley, rosemary, thyme, and oregano; amaryllis and other tropical plants; cuttings of coleus.

My potted plants start the fall/winter season near windows in downstairs rooms that approximate the kind of light they like, but as they age, they get leggy or ugly (the hibiscus loses most of its leaves), and I relegate them to upstairs rooms, the basement, or the garage until spring returns. When I first began gardening, experts advised bringing in gladioli bulbs, too, but for several years now I have left them in the ground, and most of the bulbs come up again each year.

You should know that Frederick County Master Gardener seminars and other activities—except those held outdoors or at locations other than the Extension Office—are still cancelled until further notice. In the meantime, you can find gardening information and advice online at: University of MD Extension Home & Garden Information Center,

<https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>; Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications,

<http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>; Facebook,

<http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>; or call us with gardening questions at [301-600-1596](tel:301-600-1596).



Basil:

Basil cuttings root easily in water and can then be potted up to grow all winter in a sunny window. Keep flowers pinched back, or the leaves will become bitter. (courtesy photo)

Sedum:

Most sedum can be left outside in the winter, but they do make a nice accent in the house and don't need water very often. The portulaca (pink flowers pictured here with sedum) will die back, but their prolific seeds will sprout again next spring. (courtesy photo)





Coleus: Like basil, coleus roots easily in water. Coleus flower stems are kept pinched back so that the plant won't grow too leggy while in the house. Here, some pale yellow petunias and a caladium peep out from under two coleus plants. The petunia will probably die, but hopefully, the caladium will divide, providing more of its beautiful foliage for next year. (courtesy photo)

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

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