



Season's End

Summer ended abruptly with below-freezing temperatures and snow—snow!—at the end of October. So, you think gardening is over for the year? You're looking around at blackened stems and slimy leaves, and think it's time to hang up your tools until spring?

Not so fast. There's still more than enough to keep a gardener busy outdoors, until "intermittent frost" grumbles its way down to "solidly frozen soil," still weeks away. One last mowing, which can double as a way to chop up leaves still on the lawn. Judicious tidying of flower beds is in order: you may want them to be neat, but remember, Mother Nature doesn't leave plants to shiver, naked, over the winter, and generally speaking, neither should you. Mulch perennials with the aforementioned chopped leaves, or with purchased mulch, or take the lazy gardener's approach and simply leave last year's remnants in place until spring. Any plant still showing green is still making food, so don't cut it back. Those that have turned brown *may* be cut back, but please realize you're probably removing seed pods that are meant to be winter food, hollow stems that could serve as nests for overwintering insects, and a blanket of dead leaves and branches that could be protecting your precious plants from frost heaves. Perennials that die back to the ground may be mulched right up to the crown, but for woody perennials and trees, be sure to leave some space around the stem. Never pile it up into the dreaded 'mulch volcano,' which is a prime breeding ground for pests and disease.

You've probably checked out the end-of-year garden center sales, and have a few prizes you couldn't resist buying but have no idea where to plant. Fear not. Now is the perfect time to move things around: in the more minimalist November garden, proportions and complementary textures are so much easier to get right. And there's no better time to plant, as the bedraggled bargains you plant now will develop root systems all winter long, and be ready to outperform the big expensive counterparts the nurseries will be selling next spring.

It's time to bring in houseplants, fragile terracotta pots, garden hoses, and lawn furniture. Shut off water to outdoor faucets (I learned that the hard way), and if you have a shallow water feature that will freeze solid, find a winter haven for resident frogs and fish (ditto). Tender summer bulbs (more precisely, tubers) like cannas and dahlias come out, while hardy spring bulbs go in.

But don't let your gardener's eye be dulled by practicalities. November's treasures are as rewarding as those of high summer. The lawn I left unmown all season long transformed into an ocean of frosted waves one cold morning. Who would have expected so much impact from just grass? Then, even this late, some favorite native trees and shrubs may still be clinging to their leaves. In my yard the red dogwood leaves linger. Viburnums flare, and so do the under-appreciated staghorn sumacs (which are *not* poison sumac and won't cause a rash). The intense red of blueberry leaves rivals that of the admittedly striking but oh-so-invasive burning bush. All these natives produce berries: pretty for us, important for hungry birds. The sumac berries (technically, drupes) form a fuzzy cone I like to include in my Thanksgiving centerpieces, and did you know the berries make a citrus-y drink, and are sometimes ground into powder and sold as a prized, hard-to-find spice? Not bad for a plant we often dismiss as a roadside weed. Even the dreaded poison ivy comes into its own in autumn. It's still treacherous, but how lovely to see a tree cloaked in vines of red-orange leaves, with the dark blue berries peeking through.

With the summer riot of color just a memory, shapes and textures are more readily appreciated. As you mulch, weed, and tidy, take a moment to appreciate the peeling white bark of birches, the bright red or yellow stems of osier dogwood, the orange twigs of flame willow, and the innumerable shades of grey and brown on our native oaks. Admire the lacy architecture of leafless trees, some twisty, some upright, others spreading or vase-shaped, and study Mother Nature's knack for setting them off with just the right touch of bright green pine. And listen: you won't miss the sound of green leaves rustling in summer breezes if you're tuned into the crunch of brown leaves underfoot.

Finally, yes, it's time to hang up your tools, first making sure they're freshly sharpened, dry, rust free, and treated to a coating of oil. (Some people stash them in a bucket of oil-soaked sand for the winter.) Then all that's left to do is give thanks: First, for the bounty of the summer just ended, and then for a season of rest.