Haddam Garden Club
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Garden Blog Article
by Terry Twigg

Home Again

I'm just back home after two weeks away. Suitcase is unpacked, groceries restocked, cats finally forgiving me, and it's time to pick up where I left off in the yard. Late fall traveling has the advantage of avoiding the worst of summer crowds, but for us in Connecticut, it means missing some of the most glorious weeks of our year. The twenty-degree difference in daytime temperatures takes some getting used to, but the brilliant golden leaves on the hillside behind the house more than compensate. And I had forgotten the sweet smell of autumn's cold crisp air, especially at twilight. I know the sweetness is due to decomposing leaves, but it's no less exhilarating for that. And while sixty degrees feels chilly after the tee-shirt weather of southern Italy, it's just right with a sweater, especially once I set to work.

Where to begin? For the sake of insects and small creatures, I'll leave most perennials as they are until spring, allowing their seedheads to provide food while their leaves and hollow stems provide shelter. Annuals, shriveled, brown and ugly after the first frosts, can be pulled. Cut back the peonies, making sure not to compost the mildewed stems, and remove the hosta leaves, which have transformed into translucent slime. Another week, maybe two, for my late-blooming mums, which have faithfully produced masses of subtly gold and pink daisies. They multiply generously, but are easy to pull back into bounds. Not native, but the pollinators and I love them. Look for some at next spring's plant sale.

Some trees and shrubs could do with some light pruning and shaping now; others will wait for full dormancy in January. Last spring I laboriously tied up apple branches in a rather unsuccessful attempt to espalier them; they sent up dozens of vertical branches, at least two feet higher than the deer fence. Apples don't like to set fruit on vertical branches, so I need to get out a ladder and cut them back. The two apple trees in the courtyard are leaning too far over Raphael's pool, so some major reshaping is in order there. The murky, slightly greenish water of hot midsummer has changed; now it's cold, dark, and clear, with apple leaves floating in it. Time to empty it for winter and move the frogs down to the pond. Only four this year, as far as I could count. In summer they're bronze and verdigris, but now, in late October, they're solidly black. They are lethargic in the cooler temperatures and should be easy to catch.

Some of the chores are structural rather than horticultural: build a new crosspiece for the archway at the courtyard entrance. Caulk the new columns, making sure to time it

after as long a string as possible of dry sunny days. Move a cord of firewood, one wheelbarrow-full at a time, to the back yard. And there seem to be overgrown saplings everywhere: an oak in the lilacs; sycamores with the uncanny ability to place themselves along the underground waterlines; the supposedly dwarf peach tree in the vegetable garden that's already twenty-five feet tall, with no sign of slowing down. Time to get past my qualms and buy a chainsaw (electric, of course; can't bear the noise of the gas-powered kind). With luck I'll make it to the holidays with my limbs intact.

And at the end of the list, procrastinating on paper as I've been procrastinating for real, is dealing with a pear tree at the edge of my lawn. All summer long it imitated life, smothered with bright green leaves. But the leaves are gone, and the secret is out: the tree is long dead, barely held together by ropes of poison ivy as thick as my arm. While I was away a large branch had fallen, and yesterday half of the trunk came down. Internet searches recommend setting aside clothing solely dedicated to poison ivy battles, and I can do that: The leather gauntlet gloves that went wonky when they got soaked. The white coverall that was intended to make it easier to spot ticks, but was so cumbersome I only wore it once. Can't sacrifice shears to the cause, but they'll get a very thorough scrubbing afterward. But…the chainsaw? How do I cut up half a tree, when the ivy winds round and round it? Am I supposed to cut right through it, knowing I'm releasing the demonic urushiol? Should I try to disentangle vine from dead wood? And how do I move the pieces without contaminating my wheelbarrow?

It's a challenge, yes, but not enough to dampen enjoyment of these last temperate days before the grey descends in earnest. I came home from a few weeks in the Mediterranean to fresh appreciation of the particular loveliness of Connecticut in autumn.