



September: A Love-Hate Relationship

Labor Day ought to be retitled Ambivalence Day, as it marks our annual realization that another summer has slipped away. Officially, there are still three weeks of summer left, plus a few more stolen weeks beyond the solstice. Still, something has changed.

During this summer of record-setting heat and drought, I barely worked outside. I missed those hours of productivity and quiet meditation. Plants flowered and set seed, outgrew their boundaries, or gave up and died, and I never noticed. Weeds flourished, leapfrogging through the beds, and I never pulled them. Part of me can't wait for cooler days, when I can reconnect with my gardens and the creatures inhabiting them. Part of me secretly cherishes the excuse of "It's too hot," even now that it's 'only' 86 degrees instead of high nineties, because I've let so much go for so long that reclaiming some areas will be almost as hard as starting from scratch. I won't miss dragging hoses around the yard, or pulling the weeds that keep popping up through the driveway gravel.

But the other part of me is acutely aware that, within a few short weeks, "too hot" will be replaced by "too cold," while the sun sinks ever earlier below the western hills behind my house. I won't be sorry to have respite from the endless losing battle between the woodchuck and my vegetable garden, but I will sorely miss the hummingbirds' daily visits (as I was writing this, one came to sample the petunias on my deck), and the many-colored butterflies hovering on zinnias. I laughed at the antics of tiny spotted twin fawns and the comical bobbing gait of baby turkeys. The memory of their infant charm will have to entertain me until spring, when proud mothers show off their new offspring.

And so I am taking stock. The year hasn't been a total loss: After record-setting heat and drought, torrential rains uncurled dry leaves and spurred the climbing roses to send out startlingly long new shoots over the arch. The watermelon vines, which refused to flower when the temperature was regularly in the nineties, are suddenly covered with cheery yellow blossoms—though I wonder if there will be time to set fruit before frost. The single surviving zucchini, likewise, scrambles to catch up. Two bright spots in a vegetable garden otherwise growing little more than prizewinning crabgrass. Can two puny eggplants even be dignified with the term "harvest"?

In the flower beds, mixed results. Most of the dahlias are still only thinking about setting buds. Last year I had armfuls for the Haddam Neck Fair; this year I'll be lucky to have even one. There's still enough time for spectacular fall flowering, if they choose, and if the first frost holds off until its usual Halloween-ish date. I deadheaded many perennials last month, hoping for a second flush of bloom. In the heat and drought few had the strength to try again, but as with the dahlias, there's still time. Those that haven't been deadheaded, like coneflowers and rudbeckia, are unlikely to rebloom, so I'll just leave their seedheads to feed the birds.

Since so many of what we grow as annuals originated in hot climates, they're doing better than expected. Cosmos and cleome keep putting out flowers at a manic rate, and will do so, reseeding prodigiously all the while, until the frost cuts them down. I'll see their offspring next spring, whether or not they're wanted. For now, they provide cheerful bouquets. With flowers filling my vases every week since April, I've been spoiled, but Labor Day marks the end of taking this simple pleasure for granted.

As I've said before, gardens exist as much in our heads as in our yards, so musings over what's here mingle with ideas for next year. Even though I've just made exhaustive lists to "Move this hydrangea," "Divide those daylilies," and "Rip out the bittersweet," another part of my brain is dictating "Add something blue here," "Buy another dogwood," or "Plant more spring bulbs." The acquisitions list is definitely a lesser priority, since I'll wait for fall nursery sales before buying, but the imagined future improvements help ease the drudgery of the chore list. If you haven't ordered bulbs yet, do it now, but don't plant them until you're sure the hot weather is finished, lest they mistake it for spring. If you're dividing perennials, or buying new ones, be realistic about your willingness to keep them well watered until they go dormant. I was pleased when recent storms raised Someday Pond's water level by two feet, rescuing it from mud puddle status, but I still won't depend on September rains to establish new root systems.

Slowly, during these sweet, golden, touch-of-melancholy weeks, chaos will give way to order. All the dividing, mulching and weeding that should have happened months ago will finally get done before winter, and Nature will forgive most mistakes.