



Still Summer

Yes, the days are noticeably shorter now, and yes, the specter of back-to-school is starting to stir. Labor Day is on the horizon, though even the holiday is dragging its feet, buying us a full extra week before conceding to the calendar. But it's still summer, and everywhere I turn, another project is waiting.

And my garden has never been more jungle-like. The forecast for the first week of August predicts rain almost every day. We'd be forgiven for thinking this summer must have set rainfall records, but in fact, the days of flooding torrents and violent thunderstorms have been balanced by weeks of dry and breathless heat. So, supposedly, rainfall has been fairly close to average, but you'd never know it. To borrow from Rogers and Hammerstein, the mugwort is as high as an elephant's eye—and I have elephant-sized swathes of it.

How to get rid of it? Mugwort in a flower bed isn't too hard to pull, though more likely than not it will leave broken bits of roots that will resprout as soon as I turn around. Mugwort growing through grass is harder to remove, more likely to simply break off at ground level. So I decided to try solarizing it. I try to avoid plastic, especially in the garden, but made an exception for this, rationalizing that if it rids me of the invasive mugwort and frees the space for natives, it will be a net win. I bought huge sheets of heavy plastic, ready to go.

As the name implies, solarizing only works with hot sunshine, so the job can't be put off until cooler weather. Last week I headed outside, determined to tackle it. I worked for maybe twenty minutes before several bees forcefully reminded me—on BOTH hands—that I was in their territory, and not welcome. Considerably dampened my enthusiasm. I'll try again, as soon as the swelling goes down.

Perhaps I'll work on something less intimidating for a bit. Apple trees would welcome a bit of pruning, both for shaping and to open up space for better airflow. Wisteria (American, not Chinese or Japanese, please) cut back to 5 or 6 leaves from a sturdy stem will grow fuller next year. My climbing roses, similarly, could use some discipline. Unfortunately, I can't tie in the longer stems until my carpenter rebuilds the arch, which succumbed to a food chain: burrowing insects, followed by woodpeckers, followed by small birds nesting in the crevices, then torn apart, I suspect, by a hungry raccoon. Nature, manifest.

And all the tall perennials, most of which have just about finished their first flush of bloom, will look more attractive if cut back to 6 or 8 inches above the ground, and may even reward you with a second display of flowers before being claimed by fall frosts.

And August is a perfect time to add new perennials to your beds, provided you make sure to keep them well watered during the inevitable lingering dry spells. They can develop strong root systems in the warm soil from now through most of October, creating a robust foundation before winter. Even though this is their first year in your yard, most will bloom and add welcome end-of-season color. And all are native (at least, some varieties of each are native. Others may originate elsewhere in North America, or have been intensively hybridized.)

Bee balm: tall or short, in shades of red, white, pink, and purple. My favorite is the native variety, a pleasant soft lavender. Its name gives away its importance as a pollinator.

New England aster. Also varies in height, with the same color range as the bee balm. If you remember to cut them back earlier in the season you'll have shorter, fuller plants instead of taller, leggier specimens. I never have to remember because the deer do it for me.

Joe Pye weed and liatris, once again in shades of purple and white, are just coming into their own in August, and are both tough, easy-care, long-lasting bee magnets.

To set off all these cool colors, add some heat: coreopsis and helenium, both daisy-shaped flowers in every shade of yellow through gold to orange. Black-eyed Susans, emblems of energetic country charm. In my garden, their leaves often look shabby by late summer, but the flowers are unaffected. Who can imagine a summer bouquet without them?

And finally, no Connecticut garden is complete without at least one or two varieties of goldenrod. It doesn't need any special attention, reseeds itself generously, but is easy enough to control. And I've said this before, but it's worth repeating: goldenrod does NOT cause hay fever. Its pollen is too heavy to be carried by wind, which is how most allergy-provoking particles are spread.

Just be generous with water, but sparing with fertilizer: too much nitrogen will encourage lots of soft new leaves, which won't have time to mature before frost.

Now go to the beach.