



Golden October

I have been surprised and amused by the response to last month's blog. So many people have told me how gratified and reassured they were to see a garden writer 'fess up to failure. Apparently many of you, like me, suffer from Imposter Syndrome: the uneasy feeling that everyone else has it all figured out, while I alone am faking it, wondering how I've gotten away with fooling everyone for so long. But however much research we do, however carefully we plant and water and mulch, our gardens will always remind us just how much is out of our control. Nature demands humility, and we can only wait, and hope, for better times.

And our wait has been rewarded! Summer's challenges are already fading into memory, because cooler weather brought unmistakable changes. Once-mildewed zinnias sport vivid colors above fresh green leaves. The dahlias, seemingly racing to bring every bud to bloom before the first frost, can barely support their heavy heads. The white of summer hydrangeas has changed to autumnal rose-pink, and chrysanthemums are preparing their seasonal show. All my annuals—snapdragons, ageratum, marigolds and cleome—are trying to outdo each other in these last weeks of warmth. Soon the poison ivy will flaunt its brilliant fall color, making it easier for me to identify when I try to clear out the patch around my deck.

Creatures feel the change, too. Bees, frogs, even the despised crazy snake worms have all slowed down. I've seen woolly bear caterpillars (*pyrrharctia Isabella* for you sticklers) out and about in search of a cozy winter retreat under a nice piece of bark or in the hollow of a fallen tree; come spring they'll spin cocoons and later emerge as handsome tiger moths. Meanwhile the squirrels and chipmunks, anticipating winter shortages, have stepped up their hoarding. Humans are reacting to the changes, too. Just this morning I put the last coat of paint on the last of seventeen windows. (Hallelujah!) In June, the sun would have warmed the back yard long before I finished my coffee, but today, in the chilly morning shade, I had to trade shorts and t-shirt for my designated painting jeans and sweatshirt. Almost four years into this six-month renovation project, they're so stiff with paint they just about stand up by themselves.

For some plants, it's not just the cooler weather that matters. The chrysanthemums that practically define autumn decorating are "photoperiodic" and will not set buds until the days shorten. Commercial growers mimic shorter days with darkened greenhouses, but we gardeners just wait for the earth to turn its face from the sun. That's why our mums have only buds, weeks after every garden center is bursting with

plants in full bloom. If you happened to plant yours near a source of artificial light, like porch lights, they may wait even longer. (If you have lights on all night, please, please put them on a timer or add a motion sensor. All-night lights disrupt many plants' natural cycles, and are lethal to night-flying insects, who will circle them until they die.)

Your garden mums probably aren't crammed to the gills with flowers like the commercial ones. In nature, they tend to be looser, even scraggly, unless scrupulously pinched back (three times before the Fourth of July is the accepted wisdom). Even if I remember to do that, mine are taller, with fewer flowers but, I think, more grace than the stodgy domes on display at the markets. Plus, unlike their force-fed cousins, they'll return next year. Store-bought mums were pampered in greenhouses and manipulated to bloom to the point of exhaustion, and by the time the flowers have faded and you put them in the ground, it's too late to establish a decent root system before the ground freezes. Technically, they're perennials, but most will not survive.

Of course, no October garden blog would be complete without some mention of spring bulbs. Most are foreigners—not from the Netherlands, though most are commercially grown there, but from places like Turkey and central Asia. Some, like daffodils, are of virtually no use to our native insects or bees, but many others, especially the smaller, very early varieties, even if non-native, offer an important food source to fill the gap left when native spring plants were bulldozed to create your lawn. Bulbs are a survival strategy most frequently adopted by plants in a less-than-temperate climate. They bloom, spend a few months storing next year's needs in the bulb, which is modified stem tissue, and then go dormant for an extended period, until conditions are favorable again. We replicate this cycle by planting in the fall, allowing for an extended chilling period, and then feeding them as soon as they wake up in spring.

(Connecticut's spring tends to change all too quickly to hot summer, which may not give bulbs enough time to replenish themselves before going dormant again.

Sometimes it helps to plant the bulbs a few inches deeper than recommended; the deeper the planting hole, the cooler the soil.) For suggestions on what to plant, I recommend you read these articles:

[The Best Native and Spring Ephemerals](#) (Garden College Magazine)

[Plant Bulbs to Support Early Pollinators](#) (Penn State Master Gardener Program)

Make the most of this golden month.