



On the Brink

Thirty-six degrees when I checked this morning. We've been flirting with frost for a few weeks now. Usually it's a given by Halloween, but not this year. The leaves keep falling, every day revealing more of the hillside behind the pond, but if the forecast can be trusted, there's still at least another week before the hammer falls.

Is it our awareness of this short horizon that makes the garden so appealing at this time of year? It must be: there's little left of summer's abundance, but what lingers is doubly treasured. The cosmos are gangly and overgrown—six or seven feet tall—but after a summer in which they offered nothing but feathery foliage, they're covered with pink and purple flowers. The perennial ageratum is such a thug that I really should rip it out before it conquers the universe, but then I would miss the masses of purple-blue spreading out from beneath the apple tree, and that color is such a marvelous contrast to the golden-pinkishness of the single, daisy-like mums close by. (These last are too close to the fountain pool and must be moved. If they appeal to you, look for some at the garden club's plant sale next spring.) Virtually every annual is in the same sad state of a high ratio of bedraggled stems to a very small number of blooms, but I can't bear to give up a single flower. And that's why it's always uncomfortably cold by the time I clear the beds.

Anyway, better not to clear too much. The seed heads will feed the birds, hollow stems will shelter insects, and piles of leaf litter are winter homes for small creatures. There is no bad time to pull bittersweet, and I'm hoping that I can identify poison ivy stems after they drop their leaves, but much of the rest can stay put until spring. After all Mother Nature doesn't do a fall clean-up, does she? Of course, anything diseased or mildewed should be removed—and unlike everything else, keep these out of your compost pile.

There are surprises. Clematis "Guernsey Cream," a spring bloomer, opted to test the merits of fall flowering. The Franklinia tree is finally large enough to put on a show of autumn color, and what a show it is, vivid orange-red glowing from the other side of the lawn. Do you know the tree? Franklinia alatamaha, discovered by botanist John Bartram in 1803 along the banks of the Alatamaha river and never since seen in the wild. Every single tree in existence descends from the seeds Bartram collected, and thank goodness he did, because it's a beauty. Besides the fall color, it produces white flowers with yellow centers. The effect is a tree covered with waterlilies. The same vivid orange, but this time on deeply cut, fern-like foliage, makes my baby Japanese maple "Branford Beauty" a standout even though it's still only a few feet tall. I'm trying to plant mostly native trees, but had to make an exception for this one, because Branford is my

home town. I suspect, but haven't been able to confirm, that the variety was developed by the late Dr. Nicholas Nicou, a Branford resident and passionate botanist who created an arboretum on the grounds of the library and filled his own garden with unusual trees. If anyone knows, I'd love to hear from you.

All summer long Raphael, my bronze cherub fountain, shared his pool with six frogs: three greeny-bronze, two very black, and one handsome leopard frog. I imagined them thinking themselves a cut above their country cousins in the pond out back. In reality, their only advantage was extra distance between them and the great blue heron occasionally seen hunting along the banks. But frogs hibernate by burrowing down into the mud, and since the fountain pool has a rubber liner at its bottom instead, I'll have to evict the courtyard dwellers for the winter. Not sure how to catch reluctant amphibians for transport to the old neighborhood.

Go outside this week. Watch the last leaves slowly pirouetting down in silence. Scuff through the ones already on the ground. Enjoy the peculiar softness of the air--so conducive to contemplation--on the more humid days, and the intensely blue skies only seen on crisp autumn afternoons. Cut the flowering holdouts to enjoy indoors, as many as you please, rather than losing them to frost. Take advantage of the cooler November temperatures to make up for those sweltering August days when nothing got done in your yard. Our Connecticut springs are muddy, summers hot and humid, winters cold and dreary. But our Connecticut autumn is world class.