

Glorious September

By Kathy Wolfe
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Time to reflect and plan for next year

September: where the past, present and future of the gardening year can be celebrated in its full glory. It is the time to revel in the fullness of our harvest, both of fruit and flower. We notice that the sun now warms our backs more than our heads, the cooler days bringing on a second bloom for many plants. Although there are chores to do, we don't feel the frantic pace of spring calling us from every corner of the yard. This quieter, more reflective time can be used productively to make next year's garden even better.

There is still time to seed quick growing Asian greens and arugula, as well as getting in the last of your over-wintering onions such as Walla Walla Sweets. Since September weather is unpredictable, you might experiment with other short season seed crops early in the month. If we are lucky enough to experience a long period of warm weather, you could enjoy a few more late spinach or lettuce salads. Planting under covered hoops or in cold frames will extend these crops even longer.

Canning, freezing and preserving the harvest is in full swing and well worth our efforts. What a joy to open a can of spicy peaches or make delicious blueberry pancakes in the dark of winter from the labors we put in at this time of year!

September is the perfect time to putter. Remove mushy or diseased leaves, pull faded and spent vegetables and annuals; edge the yard one more time to give definition to the beds; top up your mulch for a finished look and for plant protection and nutrition going into the winter months. Turn and aerate your compost heap to accelerate decaying. Start looking at spring bulb catalogs and get your orders in.

Grab your shovel and prepare the garlic bed for planting in October. Did you save your biggest cloves to replant for the coming year? If not, order now for best variety selection. While you are at it, prepare a new asparagus trench in well-drained soil for planting crowns in early spring. Leave asparagus ferns in existing beds until fully brown before removing in late fall or wait until spring.

Fall is a peak time to plant, dig and divide perennials, such as daylilies and peonies. While the soil is still warm and rain has begun to fall, new roots can get a good start before winter weather hits. Share your multiples with friends and neighbors, perhaps having a plant swap day and potluck lunch. Everyone will benefit with new plantings and good gardening camaraderie.



Rich, vibrant colors of fall explode in homemade preserves made with garden fruits, berries and vegetables. *Photo by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

Don't deadhead faded perennial seeds from your open pollinated flowers or vegetables if you are collecting them for next year. You can allow them to self-sow in place or store seeds in a cool, dry and dark place over winter. Check with our master gardeners, the WSU extension Websites or other credible garden resources on the best methods for extracting and storing various types of seed. Even if you aren't saving seed, leave heads on flowers, such as coneflower and other bird-friendly plants, to give a food source and winter shelter to our feathered friends.

If you plan to save unusual geraniums, coleus, or wax begonias for next year, take cuttings now and overwinter them indoors in good light. Pinch them back to keep them bushy, not leggy.

After a long, dry summer, lawns will benefit from aeration on compacted areas. Minimize weeds and over-seed sparse areas with a cool season grass seed. Raise your mowing blade to medium height and leave clippings as mulch to conserve moisture and add nutrients to the soil. Mown fallen leaves will give the same benefit if they are not too thick. Once the trees drop their leaves in earnest, mow over them, rake off the lawn and save in a pile to compost.

If your hardworking container plants are looking a bit tired, jazz them up by switching out spent summer annuals with mums or asters that blend well with your basic container plant colors and shapes. Hold off adding spring bulbs until October. If you are looking for a quick fall color pop, set an interesting gourd or bright pumpkin or squash in with your plants. Instant autumn design!

Now take a moment to remove those gardening gloves and bring out the camera and garden journal to celebrate all you have accomplished and notice what changes need to be made. A picture of your fall vegetable patch will remind you what was planted where and help you plan your crop rotation in the spring. Did that flower color combination which seemed so promising in April fall apart as the season moved forward? Are there problems with insects or diseases that need to be addressed? If you have questions about what is destroying your plants, bring a sample in to one of our Master Gardener Plant Clinics or contact a professional garden consultant. It will be well worth your time and effort to take care of the problem before it spreads into the next year.

As September unfolds, enjoy the fullness of all the efforts you have put in during previous months, the beauty and bounty to be celebrated each day, and the vision of your plans for the coming garden year.



RIGHT: Eggplants are ready in September to be picked and enjoyed. LEFT: A sunflower, fully mature in September. *Photos by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

RESOURCES:

- “September Garden Calendar.” Oregon State University Extension Service.
- “September Chores.” Margaret Roach. *A Way to Garden Website*. 2010.
- *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades*. Steve Solomon. 5th edition. 2000.
- *The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide*. Seattle Tilth. 2005.