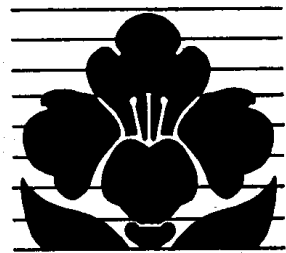


The Good Gardener



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Right Tool, Right Job

Everyone knows that using the right tool for the right job is a basic tenet of safety, resulting in fewer injuries and getting work done more efficiently. But what if you have a job that doesn't have a tool, or a job that might be better done with a different tool?

Here are some of our favorite tool tips from *Fine Gardening* and *Horticulture* magazines, from repurposing classic tools, to some clever solutions for hard jobs:

For lifting and moving heavy loads in the garden, try a cart instead of a wheelbarrow. The fourth wheel adds needed stability, and since many are now built with a removable side, or with a hopper that can be tilted, dumping the load is much easier now as well.

Are you composting more? Fine tuning those pruning skills? Do you want a better way to incorporate those slowly decomposing twigs (brown matter) with quick melting grass clippings and kitchen scraps (green matter)? Try using a chipper shredder to chop your compost into a fine mix of equal sized bits that will break down much more evenly.

And our favorite tip: if you have a large area of groundcover that you'd like to divide, transplant, or just give away, try digging up individual plugs with a post hole digger. The resulting plugs fit nicely into a one gallon nursery pot.



On A Cold Frosty Morning...

In the waning days of autumn, everyone expects the garden to be shutting down, both with our own cleanup efforts to put the garden "to bed," and also with the natural process of plants "going to sleep" on their own as freezing temperatures become the norm.

But just how hard does it have to freeze to really shut down the growing season? Why do some plants seem to rebound from a frost and reward us with late season rebloom? And what exactly is a frost date anyway?

The answer is that not all frosts are equal. Light frosts, in which the temperature dips to maybe 29 F for a few hours or overnight, then rebounds during daylight the next day, is enough to signal brilliant fall color in maples, kill the tenderest of tropicals (and tomatoes), and warn tougher perennials that the end is near (which may trigger a last bloom cycle). Moderate frosts, from 25 to 29 F overnight, result in flower death, spoiled fruit, and the end of semi-hardy container plants that were not brought indoors in time. A hard, or killing frost, is one below 24 F, or continuous below freezing temperatures for more than a few days in a row. This is the one that shuts the garden down.

In our area, the first light frosts usually occur in mid-October, with killing frosts following about a month later, on average.



Sculpting Garden Space

The house is the largest structure in the garden. If you like the idea of organizing outdoor spaces as a series of open air "rooms," it makes sense that these spaces should connect with and flow from the living spaces within the house. Thus, responding to the structure and architecture of the house becomes a powerful tool in creating cohesion and sense in the garden.

Firstly, play off the lines of the house. The spacing of windows and proportions of doors all give suggestions as to dimensions for your garden rooms. Since most architecture consists of straight lines, carry these into the garden as well, at least as far as the face of the house is tall. Curving bed lines will then continue out from these spaces, blending the house into the flow of the landscape, and softening the lines of the structure. The logical order of the spaces close to the house will give way to the hide and reveal of the natural setting surrounding it.

Next, use materials and colors from the house, both inside and out, and echo them in forms and materials in the landscape. Colors can be echoed in plants, flowers, and even pots and art pieces. Materials can be echoed in pathways, benches and vertical elements such as arbors or fences.

If you have a smaller space in which to create your garden, try echoing the shape of the house itself in garden structures. It's no accident that garden studios and even greenhouses or potting sheds mimic house architecture. They organize the spaces around them, and between themselves and the main house.

Remember to include those elements that make a space comfortable. Just as the living room is often the heart of social life inside the house, so too is the patio outdoors. Make sure to offer seating, shelter, and interesting plants, textures and colors. Include a focal point for interest, and possibly incorporate an area for food preparation and enjoyment (everyone loves the kitchen!).

For help sculpting your own garden space, give MHL D a call.





Garden Basics: Pruning & Clean Up

How you go about preparing your garden for winter and the following spring is about as personal as the garden's design itself. Deciding what to do and when to do it is best determined by the winter appearance you desire, the possibility of attracting wildlife to the garden, and your own schedule.

If you think of your garden as an orderly place, where tidiness makes you feel comfortable, then removing perennial foliage, spent flowers, and seed heads is for you. If you are okay with a more natural and relaxed look, you might remove dead foliage after a killing frost, but allow other dried elements to remain and add dimension to a snowy scene. For example the dried flowers of Sedum 'Autumn Joy' provide great architectural interest to the winterscape, when their strong bronze stems and clusters are capped

with fresh snow. Where perennial gardeners used to remove all foliage and bloom in anticipation of winter, we now appreciate those plants that add a decorative dimension to the fourth season of the year.

Delaying your seasonal clean-up may be just the thing to encourage wildlife to take up residence in your garden. Dried seed heads of plants such as coneflower, black-eyed susan, and joe pye weed provide a tasty meal for our feathered friends.

Your own personal schedule plays a part in all this, too. Sometimes fall just gets away from us and the next thing you know, the snow is flying. Tasks not to be put off include leaf removal. The large leaves of maples and sycamores tend to mat and hold water creating the perfect environment for crown rot. Shrub roses need to be pruned as they tend to be top heavy and the winter winds cause their roots to be disturbed. And annual flowers need to be removed both from beds and containers and composted if their foliage was healthy. Emptying containers of soil and storing them indoors for the winter will extend their life.

Spacing out your garden chores over the fall and winter months, as the weather and time permit, allows you (and your wildlife) to enjoy your garden year-round. Of course, if you'd like pruning assistance, give the cleanup crew at MHLA a call.



Forcing Cut Branches

One of the best known cut flower branches to grace many a late winter vase is the pussy willow (those fuzzy catkins are actually flowers!). Just as with willows, other flowering deciduous shrubs or trees may be trimmed, and their branches brought out of dormancy to provide a burst of late winter color indoors.

Good candidates for winter flower forcing include forsythia, spirea, quince, magnolia, cherry and dogwood. Wait until 6 to 8 weeks of winter temperatures have passed

outside, then collect branches by cutting with a sharp pair of pruners just above a fork where the branch leaves the main trunk.

Bring branches indoors and place in a bucket of warm water. Recut stem ends at an angle, and place in a vase with floral preservative. It may take a week or so for buds to break, then enjoy the early promise of spring!



Garden Bookshelf

Bizarre Botanicals, by Paula Gross and Larry Mellichamp, describes how to grow unique and outlandish plants from around the world in our own homes and gardens. Both authors share an interest in unusual plants, which they cultivate, and photograph, in their day jobs at the Charlotte Botanical gardens.

