

NOVEMBER & DECEMBER

It's time to assess the plants in your garden that easily survive hot, dry summers and those that struggle. Dig out shrubs that have died and consider their suitability for the position and the soil. Replace with more suitable species after you have enriched the soil with plenty of organic matter to hold onto as much moisture as possible.

Make a note of the successes in the garden that are worth repeating and the failures that need avoiding. For me that means avoiding some of the bedding plants such as petunias and busy lizzies that need watering constantly and concentrating more on geraniums, eschscholzia (Californian Poppy), helianthum (Rock Rose) and antirrhinums (Snapdragons) that seem to manage well when planted in soil enriched with soil improver and given only occasional artificial watering.

THE ORNAMENTAL GARDEN

The rose is still Britain's favourite flower according to gardeners who voted at this year's Chelsea Flower Show. Recent sales figures also confirm roses are returning to popularity. The Horticultural Trades Association reports that rose tree sales went up by 60 per cent in spring 2006 compared to the previous year.

This upsurge in interest is not surprising considering the valuable contribution roses make to any garden. Once established, rose bushes rarely need watering with more than a watering can and few other plants can boast a flowering period of 6 months producing attractive flowers, many of them with an excellent perfume.

In your own garden look to planting new roses before winter sets in. You will find plenty of container grown varieties and bare roots stock at your garden centre or gardening retailer. If you have no room in the flower border, you can still plant patio varieties in large pots. I was surprised this year to find that patio roses really are easy to look after and make a good contrast against pots of geraniums and other bedding plants. The regular use of the new RoseClear Gun! on roses was quick and easy - that's why the foliage is still remarkably clean.

Finish off autumn planting of bulbs with plenty of tulips. Varieties that have green markings, called 'viridiflora' are becoming very popular so look out for names such as 'Spring Green' (white with green markings), 'Golden Artist' (rich yellow with green markings), 'Groenland' (pale pink with broad green stripe) or a new purplish red tulip with vivid green and yellow stripe from Suttons called 'Virichic'. Most garden centres will also have mixed collections of various colours.

If slugs are a particular problem in your garden they will tend to make a beeline for these bulbs where they eat through the bulb so that when they grow next spring the leaves will be riddled with holes. To help prevent this problem water around the bulbs with SlugClear, a liquid concentrate formulation of metaldehyde

that is diluted in water and then applied around decorative plants growing in open soil.

Delphiniums do not appreciate waterlogged soil as the crowns of the plant soon rot off. To help prevent this, cut out the hollow stems from this year's growth which would otherwise hold rainwater and cover the crown with an open ended cloche or a piece of glass resting on bricks. Just this small amount of protection will help new varieties to give years of useful flowering.

TOPICAL TIP

Kill weeds in the shrub and flower border to minimise carry over of pests and diseases to next year. Use Weedol 2 or Weedol Gun! for a quick and easy kill of a wide range of weeds without hard digging.

THE LAWN

If your lawn turned brown in patches during the summer, you can be sure there is a layer of the dead grass still sandwiched between the soil and the growing leaves. This layer, known in the turf trade as 'thatch' does a similar job to the thatch you find on a cottage roof – it forms a thick layer of dead material that inhibits rain getting through. To open up your lawn to the benefits of rain and air, you need to remove this thatch layer of dead material either with some pretty heavy work with a rake or effortlessly with a mechanical scarifier.

Before you use a scarifier check if there are patches of green moss growing in the lawn. If there is you do need to kill the moss before you scarify or you will only spread the moss spores to new areas and make the problem worse. Kill off the moss with an autumn lawn dressing such as EverGreen Autumn This lawn treatment contains balanced nutrients to strengthen the grass throughout the winter and a mosskiller that will turn your existing green moss dead and brown in just a few days.

A week after application when the moss has turned brown, get scarifying. If this is the first time you have scarified your lawn, you will be amazed at how much dead material can be removed.

After scarifying, give the lawn one of its last cuts of the season to remove the thatch and any leaves that have fallen on the lawn. Add this material to the compost heap.

TOPICAL TIP

Where paths are being steadily worn into the grass from constant walking in the same line, take time to put in position paving stones that will take most of the heavy footfall. A smooth sweeping curve will be more attractive than a straight line.

THE VEGETABLE GARDEN

Lift leeks, parsnips and celery as required. Remove all yellowed or dead leaves from brassicas to improve air circulation and to reduce the spread of disease. If you are gardening on medium or heavy soil you should carry on with winter digging. This is hard work, especially as you should be adding in organic material as you go, so work at a steady pace in short shifts to avoid developing back trouble.

To create deep beds of humus rich soil, fork in plenty of organic matter every year. Use well rotted garden compost, spent growing bags or specially purchased bags of Levington Organic Choice Soil Conditioner or Miracle-Gro EcoSense Soil Improver. All this organic material will improve the soil structure, increase fertility and substantially increase the water holding capacity of all soils, so don't be stingy with it.

Now that garlic is such an everyday kitchen ingredient it's worth growing your own. The trick is to plant this side of Christmas to provide correct maturing and ripening during the height of summer. Break the seed bulb into individual cloves and plant with the tip of each clove just below the soil surface. Choose a sunny, well drained spot and feed regularly with Miracle-Gro Plant Food during spring and summer.

Picking an early crop of peas next year is possible from a sowing now of one of the hardy, round seeded varieties. If you have the benefit of a few cloches then Feltham First is a reliable cropper. In open ground try Meteor which is the best variety for November outdoor sowings.

TOPICAL TIP

Slugs are a continuing nuisance and regular forays after dark should allow you to hunt them down. If torchlight vigils are not your style, where appropriate, scatter SlugClear Advanced Pellets around the garden at the recommended rate. Never make piles of slug pellets. Sprinkle them evenly over the soil surface about 8 to 15cm (3 to 6 inches) apart. A scattering under hedges will help keep your neighbours population in their proper place.

THE FRUIT GARDEN

November is a good month for planting fruit on well-prepared ground. Ensure there is a good reserve of nutrients by adding Osmocote controlled release fertilizer to the soil at planting time. This will release its goodness next year when the soil warms up and the new tree or bush puts on fresh leaf and root growth. Fruit trees, bushes and canes are a long-term investment and to get them off to a good start they need to be pruned after planting. In the case of apple and pear bushes and standards the shoots required to form the framework should be cut back by about two thirds whilst any remaining branches can be left unpruned. Protect the dormant buds of redcurrants and gooseberries from bird damage. The ideal way to do this is to grow these crops in a wire cage or under netting.

Another safeguard is to defer pruning these bushes until spring in the hope that some buds will survive any bird attack.

INDOOR GARDENING

Stop feeding foliage and summer flowering houseplants during the November to March period and gradually reduce the amount of water given. Instead of wet roots your plants will appreciate a moist atmosphere around their leaves. Misting over the tops with plain water every day will help fight the dry air of most centrally-heated living rooms. Even better is a waterproof gravel tray that holds a reservoir of water that gradually evaporates around the plants standing above water level on the gravel surface.

Feeding of winter flowering plants such as pot chrysanthemums, pink jasmine and cyclamen will on the other hand help them develop plenty of flower buds. Miracle-Gro Houseplant Food comes in an attractive teardrop shaped bottle filled with concentrated houseplant food that will cost around 99p. Simply add five drops to a pint or 10 drops to a litre of water and balanced plant feeding is at your fingertips.

Continue to pot up suitable daffodils and narcissi for indoor flowering. Paperwhite narcissi do not need a period of cold before they flower, so are ideal for growing indoors. The yellow tazetta variety called 'Soleil d'Or' and the white 'Ziva' have the strongest scent, and therefore make ideal indoor plants as potted bulbs. A few bulbs planted up every fortnight in bowls of Miracle-Gro Bulb Booster Compost will ensure a succession of blooms and heady perfume.

At this time of the year many of the lower leaves of foliage houseplants turn brown and fall off. Simple old age is most often to blame although other common causes include too little light, too much heat or under-watering. If the leaf turns yellow before falling off then cold draughts or over-watering could be to blame.

ALWAYS READ THE LABEL. USE PESTICIDES SAFELY

EverGreen Autumn and EverGreen "I want complete autumn lawn care" contain ferrous sulphate. RoseClear® Gun!™ contains bifenthrin and flutriafol.

SlugClear™ and SlugClear™ Advanced Pellets contain metaldehyde. Weedol® 2 and Weedol Gun!™ contain diquat.

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