

Fall Is a Great Time to Plant

By Susan Camp

The 23rd Annual Gloucester Master Gardeners' Plant Extravaganza is scheduled to occur on Friday, September 5th from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday, September 6th from 8 a.m. to 12 noon at the Gloucester Moose Lodge. Master Gardeners have been busy since last winter planting seeds, nurturing cuttings, and transplanting, weeding, watering, and mulching hundreds of plants to sell.

Fall is the ideal planting time for most trees, shrubs, and perennials. Soil temperatures remain warm until the first frost, so perennials planted now will have time to develop healthy root systems before the cold weather arrives. Most experts recommend planting up to six weeks before the ground freezes. The first frost occurs in Gloucester between November 1st and November 10th, but that doesn't mean the ground will freeze. Tender annuals like basil will succumb to the cold air.

New plantings need water until the ground freezes, even on cool, cloudy days. Rainy days during the fall months provide water, but you may need to offer your plants a drink if we have a dry period. Regular irrigation promotes root growth before plants enter dormancy. Once the ground freezes, roots will cease growing until spring. New growth in late fall is unlikely to survive once the average air temperature falls to around 48°F.

Don't fertilize fall-planted perennials. The added nutrients promote immature growth that will freeze and damage or kill the entire plant.

If you run out of time to plant everything before the first frost, never fear. Go ahead and plant even if the weather is cold, unless you can provide a shelter to protect your plants. They will be safer in the ground than in pots.

Before you plant, clean up debris from the previous growing season. Dead and decaying stems, leaves, and flowers can harbor diseases and insect pests, but use your best judgment about fall cleanup. Many gardeners leave the stems and seedheads for visiting birds to eat during the winter. The seedheads on my echinacea plants are enjoyed every fall by goldfinches, and the stems may contain the unhatched eggs of beneficial insects and butterfly pupae, so the plants will remain until spring.

As you clean the garden, remove and discard perennials with weak or dying crowns and divide overgrown perennials. Dig up the entire plant with a spading fork and clean and wash the roots, looking for disease or decay. Separate the newer, healthier roots from the old crown, discard it, and replant the smaller divisions. Some perennials, including columbines, baby's breath, and hellebores are resistant to dividing and transplanting.

Mulch your new plants to protect them from winter winds, cold temperatures, and frost-heaving, which occurs when the ground surface repeatedly freezes and thaws, but wait until we have several frosty nights before applying mulch. If you mulch while the soil is still warm, new growth may appear that will die when the temperature drops below freezing. To avoid rot in perennial crowns, don't cover them with mulch. Pine straw or evergreen boughs provide adequate protection for new plants, while allowing air circulation. Remove mulch as soon as you see growth in the spring so the new plants won't produce leggy, spindly, pale stems.

Avoid planting perennials that are not winter hardy in USDA Hardiness Zone 8a (recently designated); they are best planted in spring, when they will have a better opportunity to grow healthy roots in the warming soil.

If you shop plant sales sponsored by Master Gardener units, Native Plant Society chapters, or other organizations, you will discover unusual species lovingly hand-raised and tended and presented at reasonable prices. As more gardeners learn about the value of bees, butterflies, and birds as pollinators, the popularity of native species continues to rise.

Both VCE Publication 426-203 "Perennials: Culture, Maintenance, and Propagation" and the University of Maryland publication "Perennials" contain general information for planting in spring and fall.