

Special Section
By Jill Gleeson

Landscape Planner

Spruce up your garden for fall and get a jump-start on spring.

October brings to mind many splendid rites of fall: thrilling gridiron action, grinning jack o'lanterns, festive hayrides and beerfests galore. And even though it may seem like raking fallen foliage is the sum total of autumn landscaping, there are a host of other worthwhile horticultural activities to keep you outside in the crisp, delightful air.

Fall is the time to "put the garden to bed," says Brian Holden, a landscape designer with Serene Ponds and Landscapes in Bowie, Md. Autumn is universally acknowledged as the perfect season to plant almost anything, and savvy gardeners also know there's more to do as the nights cool and the days shorten than just adding new plants to the landscape.

Amending the soil

For beginning gardeners, says Ken Duffy, ASLA, president of Geoscape, Inc, a design/build company in Oakton, Va., "probably the most beneficial thing they can do before they start is to work on soil amendment. They need to put as much organic content into the ground as they can afford time-wise and money-wise." Although soil types vary \ from town to town and backyard to backyard, there are several varieties that dominate the metro Washington area (see sidebar on page XX for more information on soil types). All can cause their own headaches, but with proper amendment even the most difficult dirt can be transformed into fertile loam.

Turning over the vegetable garden

This is the basically the same process as amending the soil, but it can be done yearly in vegetable beds with ease. "Most of the plants in vegetable gardens are annuals (like tomatoes) that die out," explains Holden. "You can take a pitchfork and turn the soil over, work in some compost. Because you are bringing the soil below up to the surface, you expose diseases and things like that to the cold temperatures. You can do that somewhat in a flower garden, but obviously perennials are rooted, so you can't turn over as much of the soil."

Mulching

Mulching is not just for springtime anymore. According to John Gamba, a landscape architect with Town Creek Landscaping and Construction Inc., in Clarksville, Md, fall mulching "helps retain moisture, protects the plant from winter freezes, and moderates soil temperature." And, of course, it will also help control late season weeds. Mulch to a depth of two to three inches—not just in flowerbeds, but also around shrubs and trees where the grass does not reach the trunk.

But proceed with caution, warns Cheryl Corson, founder of Cheryl Corson Design, LLC, in Upper Marlboro, Md: "Don't mulch in the fall until you've had a good frost – you want the soil to freeze once. That will help kill molds and fungi." Be wary as well of piling mulch against the bark of your trees. "We call this practice 'mulch volcanoes'," says Sharyn Frederick, a landscape designer with Lost Creek Landscapes, LLC, in Centreville, Va. "That is absolutely the wrong thing to do! The mulch will hold moisture against the bark of the tree, which will cause the surface to get moist and soggy." Insects,

mold, fungus and bacteria will then be able to penetrate the rotting bark, sickening the tree. Instead, taper the mulch out away from the tree, increasing the mulch depth as you go.

Watering

While fall is usually a relatively wet season, with winter dead ahead, giving your plants a bit of help can't hurt. Says Gamba, "Before the ground freezes you definitely want to water very well to help root development and get those plants established!" Keep in mind that the dripline of the tree or shrub is the average extent of the root system of that plant.

Pruning

For the greenhorn gardener, fall may seem like the perfect season to prune. But be careful: For many plants a good pruning is actually a growth impetus. While Frederick notes that "many deciduous trees and shrubs love to be pruned in autumn," others types of plants don't. Roses should be pruned in early spring, but don't prune evergreens (like holly and boxwoods) until the summer. Peonies should be cut back to ground level in the fall (though waiting until winter is fine as well), but rhododendrons, azaleas and lilacs should be pruned immediately after they are finished blooming in the spring. Says Corson, "If you prune them in the fall, you will be cutting off their buds. It won't kill them, but you'll be deprived of flowers next spring!"

When pruning, use bypass pruners, and cut out all the dead branches cleanly. Then shape the plant, again making clean cuts. You can cut back as much as one-third of the plant without hurting it. The following season, the plant should come back more full.

There are plants that can be cut back in the fall and remain perfectly healthy—but why do it when they add interest to a dreary winter landscape? "I like to leave ornamental grasses up all winter long," says Gamba. "They look great in the snow!" Then, in early spring, cut them down to about an inch from their growing crown (avoiding any new growth). Adds Gamba, "Hydrangeas can also be cut back in the late winter/early spring, because then you get to keep those nice big clumps of dried blooms through the winter."

What to prune in the...

...fall

- deciduous trees and shrubs
- peonies

...spring

- hydrangeas (late winter/early spring)
- roses (early spring)
- ornamental grasses (early spring)
- rhododendrons (immediately after blooming)
- azaleas (immediately after blooming)
- lilacs (immediately after blooming)

...summer

- holly
- boxwoods

Dividing perennials

While fall is the time to cut back to ground level most perennials, this is not all you can do to get these hardy plants ready for spring. Although newly planted perennials probably don't need to be divided yet, many of those that have been in the ground four or five years probably do. It is best to divide fall blooming perennials in the spring, but there are a host of spring bloomers that respond best to autumn division, including peonies, irises, daylilies, and poppies.

To lessen stress to the plant, prune it to about six inches above ground level, water it thoroughly a few days before division, and divide it on a cloudy, cool day. Says Gamba, "Most times, you can just take a shovel and literally cut the root system in half—and you're actually stimulating that plant to become more vigorous. If you have a perennial that's starting to fade out, dividing it helps rejuvenate it. And then you can plant them elsewhere in your garden, or give them to friend."

What to divide in the...

...fall

- peonies
- irises
- daylilies
- poppies

...spring

- asters
- chrysanthemus
- sedum

Lawn Care

Many homeowners assume spring is the most important season in lawn care; however, according to the experts, the most crucial time is actually fall. "Ninety percent of all the good things you do to a turf grass are done in the fall," says Bob Hawkins, a landscaper with Hawkins Signature Landscapes, Bowie, Md. "All your fertilization should be done in the fall. Not too many people realize that spring is exactly the wrong time to do it. Grass will tiller in the fall; this is the process when it reproduces itself and actually expands its root system and puts up more grasses. So, if you fertilize in early October and again in November, you can make your grass double in thickness."

Fall is also a great time to seed your lawn. Whether you are over-seeding an existing lawn that has thinned out, or planting a whole new lawn, cool, wet autumn weather helps the seeds establish more easily. Aeration, in which small soil plugs are removed from the lawn in order to lessen compaction and allow for greater movement of water, oxygen and fertilizer, is best done in the fall, when the turf can more quickly recover. Liming also helps; this is sometimes necessary to raise the pH of acidic soil (most turf grasses prefer an almost neutral pH). Limestone products are best applied to lawns in late November through February. In short, take care of your turf grass this fall and, says Hawkins, "in the spring and summer months, you'll have a much better lawn!"

How to plant

Want to have a full, luscious garden next year? Plant now. Autumn is the ideal season to put almost anything in the ground because, as Gamba says, "It's a good root growth

season, and it's also a moist season, so Mother Nature helps you with the watering. And fall is followed up by winter and spring, which are also moist seasons. So by the time the summer rolls around, with its droughts, heat and humidity, the plant is established. It's a lot hardier and has a higher survival rate."

Once a plant is established, it's not only healthier, but also better looking. Says Frederick, "As long as you care for it properly at the time of planting, it's going to look much better a year after you plant it. Then you'll get a big showy display!" To help a new plant get established, even in fall be sure to keep it well watered. "After you put a shrub in the ground," says Frederick, "water it slowly for 20 minutes every three days the first month you've planted it. A good rainstorm counts as a watering, but thunderstorms don't because the water runs off and evaporates too quickly."

But before you head out to buy plants, take note of which areas of your property are sunny or shady, wet or dry, and what kind of soil and sun exposure they have. Says Duffy, "Every yard has little micro climates, so start defining areas. Then choose the right plant for that climate. If you put the wrong plant in the wrong location, it's just going to die. Or even if it survives, it won't thrive." Also consider purchasing plants that have different bloom times. "I see a lot of yards," says Duffy, "with a ton of color in the spring, and then nothing the rest of the year. Try to space it out!" Lastly, keep in mind how big the plant will eventually become. Says Frederick, "Perennials can sometimes be larger than some shrubs. You need to space them out according to their average full grown size."

Planting Guide

Fall Blooming Annuals and Perennials

Pansies

October is the perfect time to plant these popular flowers. How long they last, says Holder, "is dependent on how moist the fall is. I've seen some years when they are still looking great at Christmas." Pansies are cool season growers, but frost will take a toll on them. They should winter over, however, and by March you could see them popping up again. Holden recommends the Crystal Bowl series, with unmarked, compact flowers. "I've found them to flower a little bit more prolifically, and bounce back better in the spring," he says. Hawkins is a fan of the Delta series and Icicle pansies. "They're really good performers," he says. "They'll actually bloom longer into the cold season and come back more readily in the spring. Pansies are really great plants, and if it hasn't gotten too hot, they'll last until June."

Violas, snapdragons and primula

These are favorite fall bloomers, though by now they may be hard to find in local greenhouses. These plants may winter over, depending on weather conditions, but in general they are not as tolerant of cold temperatures as pansies.

Ornamental kale and cabbage

Although they do not produce an actual flower, ornamental kale and cabbage can provide gorgeous color, often through the winter. As a general rule, however, they do not winter over. Says Gamba, "The effects come from the foliage. The foliage color depends on the variety, but it can include cream, green, pink, and purple. They're great plants."

Chrysanthemums

When field grown, mums can act as perennials—however, they are often sold in pots as annuals. Just be sure to enjoy them while they last. According to Holden, “Mums have a quick lifespan in pots; once you get the first frost, they’re done.”

Asters

A perennial similar to a mum, though many professional landscapers actually prefer them. Says Hawkins, “Fall asters look a little bit like mums, but they’re actually better performers. They bloom better, and they won’t produce a lot of runners, which mums sometimes will.” Unlike mums, asters do not need to be pinched back in the summer to prevent early blooming; they can be planted in the fall, though supplies may be low by now. Sarah Boasberg, a professional garden designer who is a longtime member of the board of the Friends of the National Arboretum, loves asters’ colors. She says, “Asters have a different color palate than mums, including blue, purple, mauve, magenta and white.” Boasberg especially recommends *Aster cordifolius*, a self-seeding aster with violet blue flowers, which blooms as late as Thanksgiving.

Ornamental grasses

According to Frederick, ornamental grasses “look really good in the fall. They come in all different sizes and colors. As soon as the cold snap hits they turn brown, and they look really pretty with snow around them.” As with all perennials, ornamental grasses can be planted in the fall, but it will take one growing season for them to reach their full potential. Frederick recommends feather reed grass, nodding sea oats, hakone grass, dwarf fountain grass and switchgrass.

Other late summer/fall blooming perennials

Japanese anemone, pink turtlehead or white turtlehead, Appalachian bugbane, autumn crocus, winter-hardy pink cyclamen, Joe-Pye weed, common sneezeweed, Autumn Bride coral bells, hardy hibiscus, yellow wax-bells, rough blazing star, red spider lily, Nippon or Montauk daisy, obedient plant, cutleaf coneflower, rough goldenrod, rose verbena.

Fall and Winter Blooming Shrubs

Encore azaleas

Produce some blooms in the spring, but the big show is reserved for late summer through late fall. Says Boasberg, “They’re fabulous – they come in a whole range of colors now. If you’re in the city, they should be hardy. If you’re out in the country, just be sure to plant them someplace where they’ll be a little protected.”

Fall-blooming camellias

Cold hardy, these camellias flower in shades of pinks and whites. They can be planted now, and will bloom in late fall for upwards of two months.

Dwarf burning bush

A deciduous shrub that is famous for its leaves, which turn a spectacular fire red in the fall.

Red twig dogwood

Says Gamba, “It’s actually a shrub that grows in the shape of a forsythia. It doesn’t have much of a flower, but in the wintertime, the branches turn bright red. It looks really beautiful when there’s snow on the ground.”

Christmas rose

Says Holden, "It's a very unique plant. They get about two feet high, and have a rose-like flower in colorful pinks and whites. Depending on temperatures, they will bloom sometime from December to March."

Winterberry holly

This deciduous holly will produce red berries in November and December. According to Holden, "How long they hang on to their berries is dependent on how many birds are in the area. Birds love to eat the berries!" Female winterberry hollies berry; males do not, though they must be present to pollinate the female plants.

Spring and Summer Blooming Shrubs

Bluebeard

A compact, deciduous shrub with fragrant blue flowers. Blooms in June, attracts bees and butterflies.

Sweetshrub

A deciduous shrub with large, tropical-like leaves, it produces red strappy flowers in late-May. Leaves turn an attractive yellow in the fall; will grow four to five feet tall.

Clethra

A deciduous native shrub, which blooms in July. There are two smaller cultivars that Frederick especially recommends: Ruby Spice and Hummingbird. Both have bottlebrush-like flowers; Ruby Spice's are pink, Hummingbird's white. Clethra's leaves turn yellow in the fall.

Bottlebrush buckeye

A deciduous shrub that can grow 10 to 12 feet high. Will produce large, white flower spikes in June and small nuts that ripen in the fall.

Other spring and summer bloomers

Slender Deutzia Nikko, Dwarf Fothergilla Mt. Airy, Annabelle hydrangea, Virginia sweetspire Henry's Garnet, Knockout shrub roses and viburnum. Also, well-known shrubs such as forsythia, camellia and azalea.

Bulbs

For a gorgeous garden come springtime, put those bulbs in the ground now! Just be sure to prepare your soil first. Says Shirley Nicolai, a past president of the National Capital Area Gardening Clubs, who currently serves on the board of the Friends of the National Arboretum and is the Third Vice President of National Garden Clubs, Inc., "Good drainage and organic material is welcome; sunny sites or areas with deciduous trees/shrubs work well. Bulbs purchased this year will have stored their food, but supplements of bonemeal in the coming years should be beneficial." And if you have a particularly small bed, Corson suggests planting "bigger bulbs (like tulips) deeper, with smaller bulbs (like crocuses) on top."

Tulips

Always a spring favorite, but tulips have their drawbacks. Deer and other animals love to munch on them, and after the first year they tend to decline in quality (in fact, some gardeners replace their tulip bulbs every year). To keep critters away from tulip bulbs, try mixing them in with daffodil bulbs (which animals won't eat.). Bloom times vary widely depending on the type, but generally range from early April to early June.

Daffodils

Says Nicolai, “Daffodils are so versatile – with miniature to large and early to late blooming cultivars of varied coloration. They also reproduce, forming larger clumps that can be divided and replanted.” As with tulips, daffodil foliage must be allowed to mature (this recharges the bulb for next year). However, says Boasberg, “It turns out you don’t have to let them go as long as previously thought. If you just let them go until the foliage flops, you’ll get almost the same effect as if you let the foliage yellow. Also, the latest studies I’ve read say that you don’t have to remove the dead flower stalks – it doesn’t seem to make a difference.”

Hyacinths

A showy plant that grows up to a foot high and offers blooms in a range of colors, including shades of pink, purple and blue, as well as yellow and white. Hyacinths return each spring; what are commonly called “wood hyacinths” (the scientific name is *Hyacinthoides hispanica*) will spread over time, even in relatively deep shade.

Crocuses

Crocuses bloom in early March and will naturalize. They grow between four and six inches tall. Comes in a wide variety of purples, as well as yellow and white. Says Boasberg, “Squirrels really loves crocuses, but the ones they seem to like the least are *Crocus tomasinianus*.”

Other early spring bloomers

Snowdrops, chinadoxa, miniature irises.

Think twice

While these plants may be technically able to survive in the metro Washington area, for various reasons they tend not to *thrive* here. You might want to think twice before planting them in your garden.

Rhododendron

“D.C. and Virginia are the southernmost area that you can grow rhododendrons, but that doesn’t mean they’re happy here! We have very hot and humid summers, and they don’t like the heat of the direct sun, or the high humidity. They like acidic soil, so that’s why they can survive here, but they’re miserable.” —Sharyn Frederick, Lost Creek

Landscapes

Loropetalum

“This is a beautiful flowering shrub; some publications say it’s hardy here. I don’t think it is. I lost it a couple of times to cold winters.”—Sarah Boasberg, professional garden designer and board member of Friends of the National Arboretum

Common lilac

“It’ll grow here, but it’s just not happy. They don’t smell as much here as in other climates. It’s too hot and muggy, the nights aren’t cool enough, and it mildews. Persian lilacs will do better.” —Cheryl Corson, Cheryl Corson Design

Delphinium

“It’s too hot and muggy here. It’ll grow, but it won’t thrive. You can plant foxglove instead.” —Cheryl Corson, Cheryl Corson Design

Paper Birch

“It doesn’t like the combination of the daytime heat, high humidity and lack of cooling at night. You can plant river birch instead.” —Cheryl Corson, Cheryl Corson Design

The ground beneath your feet

Clay soil

Where it's found: around the Beltway and northern Virginia

What it means for your garden: Clay soil can mean trouble for plants because it is so dense it can retard root growth. It also contains very little pore space for oxygen, and offers very poor drainage. Marine clay is one of the hardest soils to amend. According to Ken Duffy, Geoscape, Inc, Oakton, Va., "A lot of areas in Alexandria have marine clay, because they're off the basin of the old Potomac. There's no pore space in marine clay – it's actually used for lining the bottom of ponds – so the plants literally drown or suffocate."

Possible solutions: Clay soil can be amended, however, with peat moss or humus, which will help loosen up the clay particles, improving drainage. "Some people," notes Sharyn Frederick, Lost Creek Landscapes, Centreville, Va., "will even add sand to clay soil. You shouldn't use play sand, because its grains pack too closely together. You have to use construction sand – it has larger sized granules. But you will also need to add organic matter. Compost and fertilizer will convert clay soil into better soil, depending on your elbow grease."

More ideas: Instead of tossing soil amendments onto your garden bed and praying earthworms will till it for you, use a shovel or Rototiller to work it into the ground. "How far down you have to go depends on what you're planting," says Duffy. "The majority of root systems for perennials, annuals and a lot of shrubs are going to be within the first foot." Make sure that everything below the amended soils drains, or you will still have a layer that collects water.

Sandy soil

Where it's found: around the Bay

What it means for your garden: Sandy soil presents the opposite predicament of clay-based soils: It is so porous it retains little moisture – and nutrients.

Possible solutions: Mulching around your plants will help, as will adding peat moss or humus (which retain moisture), and compost and fertilizer. Adds John Gamba, Town Creek Landscaping and Construction Inc., Clarksville, Md, "It's also good to design for that type of soil. I use xerophytic plants, which are plants that can handle an arid climate. Even if you're getting rain, if you have sandy soil, it isn't being absorbed into the roots of your plants. Moonbeam coreopsis is a great one, as is Autumn Joy sedum."

Rocky soil

Where it's found: Loudoun County, Va., and west toward the Appalachian Mountains.

What it means for your garden: While growing in rocky soil is often not an issue for plants (as long as there is enough soil between the rocks), digging in it is an issue for gardeners.

Possible solutions: There is a simple (if not easy) solution to this problem, which has been faced by farmers for centuries. "Break up the rock, and remove as much of it as you can," advises Duffy. "And then go in and amend as much of the soil as you possibly can with topsoil, humus and leaf mulch. He adds, "A really dedicated gardener, working on their own, and depending on the space, may spend a year just prepping the soil on the

weekends...bringing in compost, turning the soil over, loosening it up, trying to give the soil a good organic content.”

What about plant zones?

Officially known as the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, this map plots the average annual minimum temperatures across the United States, Canada and Mexico. As explained on the US Arboretum website (www.usna.usda.gov), “The map shows 10 different zones, each of which represents an area of winter hardiness for the plants of agriculture and our natural landscape.” The lower the zone number, the colder the area. For example, Fairbanks, Alaska, is in Zone 1, while Honolulu, Hawaii is in Zone 11. While the temperature differential between zones is 10 F, the map gets even more specific, further dividing zones 2 through 10 into a and b, which have a differential of just 5 F.

According to Brian Holden, a landscape designer with Serene Ponds and Landscapes in Bowie, Md, “The zones are generally related to things like elevation, and data gathered over many years from various growers and professionals in those areas. Basically, there’s a line that cuts almost through Washington, and then more or less follows I-95 and cuts over above Baltimore. Everything from south and east of that line is Zone 7 and everything out west and to the north is Zone 6.”

Although local garden centers and nurseries only stock plants zoned for the areas that they serve, when ordering plants from national distributors it is crucial to know the zone in which you are located. While there are many other factors that contribute to a plant’s ability to thrive, chances are not good, for example, that *Eucalyptus citriodora* (Lemon eucalyptus), a Zone 10 tree, will survive a DC-area winter.