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October Garden ~ Brian Crumblehulme

There is more pleasure now in feeding on the fruits of your labour and industry, than in viewing the ruins and decays that this season hath made amongst nature's glories. There is a time for all things, as well to pluck up as to plant. This month invites you to both, being the most seasonable to plant young trees that are not tender exotics, and to eradicate the old and decayed...

'Cut off the withered stalks of asparagus near the ground, and weed the beds clean, and cover them with good rich dung not quite rotten, which will defend the roots from violent frosts, and enrich the bed, by the rains washing in its virtue.'

The Gardeners Monthly Directions, 1688

Between the rains, this is indeed an active season. Most fruit will have to be picked and stored indoors. Green tomatoes will eventually ripen on the window sill or you can use them for frying, pickles, or chutney. Carrots, beets, and parsnips can be left in the ground and lifted as needed, but they will require protection from freezing should the temperature get really low. And, as above, once the leaves have fallen, this is best time to plant fruit trees.

I am preparing a new garden this winter on ground containing lots of clay. So while I had the advantage of an excavator, I had a three foot deep trench dug along the south facing bank in preparation for tree planting. This trench, now half-full of compost and wood ash, is waiting only for a layer of top soil and manure by which time it will be ready for six or seven semi-dwarf trees.

Fruit bushes and canes can also be planted and pruned now to remove all the old fruiting branches and allow the new ones to mature for next year. For propagation, select twelve-to-fifteen inch cuttings of any desired fruit and bury two-thirds of the lower stem in rows at the edge of the garden, remembering to tread the ground firmly around each one. Remove all the buds from the lower part of the stem to discourage 'suckers' or underground shoots that will not fruit as readily. The exception is the blackcurrant which produces better from shoots produced below the ground.

Choose a dry day to make late sowings and plantings of garlic, onion sets, and fava beans. This year I am experimenting also with winter peas. This hardy European variety is about one inch high as I write and should grow a few inches more before slowing down. If it gets really cold, I may have to cover them but the prospect of fresh peas in April is worth the effort. There is still time to sow winter salads, lettuce, endive, chard, rapini, etc—if you have an unheated greenhouse or a frame. I use door-sized sheets of plate glass recovered from the re-cycling depot to make mini-green houses around my garden to protect salads, winter and spring vegetables. Behind glass is always warmer than in front and the panes act as a screen from heavy rain and wind.

'To dig or not to dig'—if Shakespeare will forgive the corruption. Garden books all insist that dahlias, gladioli, and most lilies, must be lifted from the ground, cleaned, dried, and stored for the winter in a shed or garage. Fuchsias, geraniums, and many so-called annual flowers, are also discarded like Christmas wrapping paper, or treated like tropical exotics.

In this region, it's a matter of chance. In a bad winter, expect to lose some to frost, but I have friends that have left dahlias and glads in the ground for the last ten years only to watch them flourish. If the ground is well-drained and sunny, it's a good bet. Geraniums, calendula marigolds, etc, are more vulnerable but then again, a sheltered south-facing corner under the eaves of the house will probably be fine, and you can decorate your January salads with violets and marigold petals even if its snowing.

Speaking of violets and wallflowers, the seeds you sowed in July will now be large enough to plant out for winter flowering, and the ones you bought from the nursery in summer will make good cuttings, if taken now, for a extra spring show.

Some plants are naturally frost hardy and some are not. When a leaf freezes, ice will form inside the cells causing the cell wall to break and consequently killing it. Tropical plants like nasturtiums keel over at the first mention of frost. Hardy plants however, have a cunning technique that allows them to survive otherwise damaging frost. When they begin to 'feel' cold, they will move water from the leaf cells into the interstitial

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space between the cells. This activity greatly increases the salt concentration and osmotic pressure within the cell so it requires a greater degree of cold for ice to form. Ice crystals may develop in the space outside the cell but this is relatively harmless.

Many temperate-zoned plants will wilt during frost because the cells are short of water, but once the temperature returns to normal they reverse the operation and perk right up again. Some plants may not appear to wilt at all because they are supported by a framework of lignin that helps maintain shape, even though they are dry.

So what has all this to do with me, you ask? If you have plants outside vulnerable to damage by frost, the best treatment short of moving them indoors, is to cover them and allow them to dry out. Drying, by definition, removes water from the leaf cells, increases the cell sap concentration, and makes them more resistant to frost damage. They might wilt, but that can be remedied by watering at a later, safer date. That way the chances of survival are much better. A plant that has fresh lush growth is far more liable to frost damage than a crusty withered specimen. Maybe too, that is another of nature's ways of providing apt metaphors for some of us sexagenarians.

This Year's Special - Green Tomato Chutney

Version 1

6 lbs chopped tomatoes,
3 lbs chopped sour apples
4 oz salt (*I think this is too much salt. I would cut the salt and add chilli peppers.*),
8 oz brown sugar,
3 pints vinegar,
6 cloves garlic,
6 oz ground ginger,
1 oz mustard seed

Put all the ingredients in a pot and boil gently for about 20 minutes. Pour the contents into an earthenware jar, cover, and store in a warm place for three days. Return to a cooking pot, bring to a boil, and bottle in the usual way. Sultanas or candied ginger may also be added for extra flavour.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management, 1861

Version 2

1 quart cider vinegar
1-1/2 oz mustard seed
1 oz ground nutmeg, 1/2 oz ground cloves
tsp ground black pepper
1 oz ground cinnamon
pinch of cayenne

Add all of the above to a large kettle, bring to a boil, then add: 1/2 lb sugar, fresh horseradish to taste, about 1/2 gallon of chopped tomatoes. Boil and reduce until well cooked, then can in the usual way.

Popular Gardening, 1912 