

September in the Garden



Welcome to my tenth year of sharing monthly garden chores and tips based on my garden in Palo Alto. This has been a banner year for tomatoes! Five Cherokee Purple tomatoes have weighed in at over one pound each! And the flavor is outstanding.

I did the same soil prep and planting date as last year, and I have had to share this year's crop with neighbors and friends!! My blue-ribbon tomatoes are outstanding this year, prolific, fully red or yellow and ripe, compared to last year's pathetic and

scant display. If you have followed these monthly columns for a few years, you know that squirrels (rats with bushy tails) have been an issue every tomato season. I have changed from veiling over the tomato cages with Velcro to PineSol in small water bottles hung right near each reddish tomato, and also mixing bird seed first with cooking oil, and then Capsaicin powder, an active component of chili peppers, to keep squirrels off the bird feeders. I do have a new weapon in my crusade against freeloading squirrels. It's a solar powered, waterproof Animal Repeller (easily found on-line) with motion detector that sets off flashing LED lights and ultrasonics. The iddy biddy squirrels no longer feel welcome! Every September, I do serious pruning of tomatoes, removing suckers and crunchy leaves. Since my tomatoes have gotten so prolific, I have had to attach them to the fence five feet from the tomato barrels. In September, tomatoes need supplemental fertilizing, either from top down with worm casting tea, or a liquid fertilizer; or dig in an organic fertilizer around each plant. Preferred fertilizer should be a no nitrogen fertilizer, 0-10-10 that encourages fruiting.

My roses have been showing off also, trying to compete against the tomatoes for size honors. Following Ray Redell's Rose Feeding Schedule, at the beginning of September, I spread granular 0-10-10 around the drip line of all 50 roses, and then, two weeks later, roses get fish emulsion, 2T. per 2 gallons of water poured around the drip line. According to my sources, due to our pleasant September weather, I will plant more pole beans as well as Swiss chard, kale, and more zucchini, plus pickling cucumbers (they grow faster than regular cukes).

Dahlias are having a banner year, with lots of gorgeous blossoms. I should have staked them in August due to the weight of their flowers, but better late than not at all. Dahlias get a dose of 0-10-10 in September. Their lower leaves are showing some mildew, so I strip off the lowest leaves and spray the rest of the plants with Safer garden fungicide. I also vigorously deadhead to maintain a constant source of blooms.

In September I divide Echinacea (every 3rd yr) and coreopsis (every other yr). If my dwarf Agapanthus get too rotund, I dig that one up, quarter it with a spade, re-plant one fourth, and create 12 or more baby Agapanthus from the original plant. Do let me know if you want a border of Aggies. I will save some babies for you. Lantana as well as Echinacea, Salvia, Rudbeckia, and Coreopsis are considered nectar plants, which means that they are just about the only food for humming birds and Monarch butterflies. So I grow them next to the milkweed both in my garden and in the parking strip. For the last four years I have found a few

Monarch eggs hanging around the milkweed. I usually bring them to my grandson's classroom in Berkeley so the class can watch the amazing and mysterious transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

Either September or October is a good time to feed camellias, azaleas, gardenias, and rhodies with 0-10-10 fertilizer for bigger and better blooms. They are almost the only show in the garden during winter, so I like to improve their blossom size with food. Right now is a great time to prune fruit trees, pruning to control height, get rid of suckers, and shape the tree. Also trim back long curly streamers on wisteria. Got strawberries? Clip the runners to strengthen the mother plant.



If September stays warm, mulch your flowers and vegetables to conserve moisture. I have been setting out annuals like Calendula, Pansies, Primroses to get a good start for fall in the border around my front lawn. September is also the month to consider enriching the soil. Can you insert a luncheon fork into your flowerbed easily? The cheapest and most effective way to improve the performance of garden favorites is by applying self-created compost topped off with mulch several times during the gardening year. Mulch also helps cut back on watering by holding in the moisture. I always make sure to water thoroughly before applying mulch to an area, and then I soak the mulch. Otherwise, a Blow and Go Gardener will blow that mulch to the neighbor's yard.

In late September when I evict some of the summer veggies like zucchini, cucumbers, bell peppers from the Veggie Plot, I sweeten the soil with a mixture of compost and chicken manure, and then I replant sections, using 6-packs of bok choy, Napa cabbage, spinach, Swiss chard, and bunching onions, as well as kale, which I think tastes sweeter in cooler weather. I also plant snow pea seeds in six-packs so they can replace the tomatoes in the wine barrels in October, and I start a few green bean seeds also, in case the weather stays warm enough to allow them to grow. Lettuce has its own spot all year, outside the kitchen in 3 window boxes. True story: I never have to buy lettuce in the store. You should try a lettuce six pack somewhere outside your kitchen door. Just remember to water it and you will be amazed! I avoid head lettuce and always plant loose leaf or Romaine lettuce so that I can trim the outer leaves every night for salad. Summer Winds Nursery has varieties of lettuce in six packs to suit the various seasons.

Remember that COSTCO sells my favorite spring-flowering bulbs, anemone and ranunculus. I add compost and fertilizer when I plant them, usually at the front steps. Soak the bulbs for an hour, and then set the tubers, prong side down, in two inches of soil.

Enjoy whatever size yard or patio that you have. Get a rectangular pot and enjoy some home-grown lettuce! Feel free to ask me any questions by e-mail.

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