

Let's Talk Gardening

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The Country Gardener

Help Mother Nature Recycle Leaves

If you have leaves falling from your trees about now, please don't send them to the dump. All the leaves you sent last year are still there—buried in the plastic bags. They'll still be there many years from now. Save the plastic bags for REAL trash. Pile those leaves up out back someplace and let them rot and use them next spring for loosening the soil and organically feeding your garden beds. If you have the inclination, you can put them in the gardens now and cover them with at least a couple of inches of soil and let them set until next spring. You'll have one of the best gardens in the neighborhood because you added organic material and natural fertilizer. The leaves were the storehouses for the nutrients the tree took up from the soil all spring and summer. You're just recycling them.

This is a good time to add compost to your lawn if you haven't already. Put about ½ inch on, rake it with the back of a rake so that it goes down to the soil and water it if it doesn't rain again soon. You'll see the results next spring. I guarantee it.

Also, if you haven't added any compost to your garden beds—especially the veggie beds—now would be a good time to do that, too. Put 3-4 inches in each bed and till or spade it in as deeply as you can and let it set until spring. On the flower beds, put about an inch or two on top of the soil and just let it set. It'll eventually get into the soil by just being there.

If you put some broccoli in a few weeks ago and it looks pretty bad by now, it's due to the unusually warm weather we've been having. You'd be better off just pulling it out and replacing the plants with new ones. It looks like it's gonna stay cool for a while now and that's what the cole crops want/need/like. This is also the time to plant the other cole crops—Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and cauliflower. You can plant spinach now as well as leaf lettuce, beets, carrots, mustard, radishes, and turnips. It's too late to plant tomatoes or bell peppers so don't even try. You'll be disappointed.

If you want some indoor winter color, you can try “forcing” some bulbs—they're available in many nurseries now. This means to stimulate a bulb to bloom out of season indoors in a pot. Some of the bulbs that can be forced are amaryllis, paper whites, and hyacinths. Check with the nursery where you buy the bulbs to determine how long you need to keep the bulbs in the frig before you pot them up. Some nurseries sell pre-chilled bulbs. Different bulbs require different chill periods. It will take about 12-15 weeks for the bulbs to root enough. The flowers should follow in 3-4 weeks. Paper whites flower in about six weeks...they're the major exception. So you see it's not something you can do for Thanksgiving, but you might get some paper whites by Christmas. Ain't that cool?

If you've noticed an extraordinary burst of bloom on many of your perennials of late, it's because of the late rains and the unusually warm weather we've been experiencing. Not to worry. It's OK. Really! Some of the plants that normally go dormant in the winter sometimes become energized in the fall when the conditions are just right and bloom their silly heads off. They'll still go dormant when the weather warrants it. It's OK. Really!

As we approach what we call winter here, it's time to turn off the automatic sprinkler system. The ground is still moist down where it counts and doesn't need any more water. Save your money. You can always run it through a manual-cycle if/when the lawn needs it later. If your red-tipped photinias have little freckles on them, you might wanna consider replacing them this fall with a better shrub. The red-tips are too prone to those freckles (a fungal infection) and are gonna kick the bucket sooner or later anyway. Something like Burford holly works well as does dwarf yaupon holly. For that matter, most of the hollies do better than red-tip.

Send your comments and/or questions to gardener@gvtc.com.