

Ask a Master Gardener Article
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Title: Fall Planning and Planting

Question: I know that fall is a good time to plant pansies and spring bulbs. Is there anything else I should be doing in my ornamental beds at this time of the year?

Gardeners seem to be assailed each autumn with displays through print advertisement, catalogs, and displays in garden centers of pansies, mums and spring bulbs. It would be difficult indeed to escape our notice that this is the time for planting these items, in order to have fall and winter blooms, as well as those welcome early spring blooms resulting from fall bulb planting.

However, one of the most important activities you can do in the autumn months is to take the time to focus a critical eye on your existing garden, and evaluate just how well some of your existing plantings performed over the past year, and plan what you as a gardener can do now to change and improve the garden over the next twelve months.

This has been said before but bears repeating; fall is the most desirable time to do soil tests because landscapes and gardens can still be amended and recommendations followed, such as adding lime, a common recommendation in our area of the state due to the fact that much of our soils test as acidic.

One of the questions you may ask yourself is, were plants receiving the correct amount of sunlight? The location of plants must match their needs, because plants can't adapt to their surroundings as we humans can. If plants were located in a position to receive full sun all day, and they appeared to suffer from that intense exposure, you should reexamine the light requirements of that particular plant. What we must understand is that sunshine intensity differs across Georgia. If you compare noon sun in Brunswick to noon sun in Blue Ridge, you realize there is a tremendous difference. Full sun in the north Georgia Mountains might mean sun exposure from sunup to sunset. In south Georgia, it usually refers to more than eight hours of unfiltered sun. Partial or moderate shade in south Georgia is all-day

sunshine filtered through high foliage, whereas in north Georgia it is indicative of four hours of direct morning sunshine. Be certain you have examined the required conditions for a particular plant before you plant. As gardeners, we also need to critically evaluate how well our plants have responded to the sun lighting conditions they are receiving as situated in our gardens, and if they appear to have suffered due to too much or too little intense sun lighting. Now is the time of year to relocate them. After all, the planting label may be absolutely truthful in terms of say full sunshine in Pennsylvania, but a full day of sun on a July day in Georgia may leave that plant scorched!

Another aspect of your garden that should be examined at this time of the year is whether plantings have become too crowded, due to either close proximity to other plants, or the need to divide a planting. Many perennials will need to be divided every few years to control their size and quantity, help re-invigorate them, and improve the overall health of the plants. Plantings that are crowded have less vigorous growth and do not bloom as much. The best time to divide the perennials is in the fall when they have finished blooming. Reduced flowering and vigor, dead stems, compacted roots, and a general unhealthy appearance are a sign they need to be divided.

There are several methods of dividing perennials. Perennials that have fibrous root systems, like Phlox and Salvia, should have sections of the root mass separated with a pitchfork or shovel. Then pull the large clumps apart to get the individual sections with growing points. Hostas can be divided by lifting the entire colony and then pulling apart the individual clumps by hand. Perennials with rhizomes, like irises and cannas, must be dug out, washed off, and then cut by hand. Each section of the root must have an eye where the foliage grows. Spreading perennials, like thrift and candytuft, can often be divided into large clumps where each can be planted separately. These and many other perennials, with the proper care, can provide beauty for your garden year after year.

Becoming a good plant detective, especially in the fall, can help you to insure that your garden becomes more successful and beautiful each and every year. For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.