



THE GARDEN GIRL

Full Circle

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So here we are again, approaching autumn, and a full year has turned since I started guiding you towards creating your ideal garden. Your borders have revealed themselves to you through each season. You can reflect upon your successes and your failures: I hesitate to use the word failures, because an experiment that doesn't produce the desired effect is just a steppingstone towards a more appropriate solution.

If, like me, you've turned a blind eye to some spectacular howlers in your borders, then autumn is the ideal time to rectify them. One disadvantage of a happy perennial is that it will expand after about three years, often swamping less robust neighbours: sanguisorba Lilac Squirrel, veronicastrum, thalictrum or meadow rue, be afraid, be very

Photos:
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Miscanthus grass

afraid! So, it's time to lift and divide: cut back top growth, dig up the whole clump, chop it in half or quarter and replant the newest bits from the outside of the clump. No need to be delicate, I use a saw! Suburb favourite, sedum spectabile Autumn Joy, tends to die off in the middle creating a donut effect, so cut away the old middle bit and compost it, and replant with newer outside pieces. Textbooks will tell you that early flowering perennials such as pulmonaria and hardy geraniums are best divided in autumn, whereas those that flower from July onwards are better left until spring. Why? Because late bloomers, such as eryngium and rudbeckia, often flower well into October, but it doesn't have to be a hard and fast rule.

On the subject of cutting back, some people like me, prefer to cut back perennials throughout autumn and early winter, leaving more sparse borders than those who prefer to wait until spring. Arguments for autumn clearance? Less hiding places for pests such as slugs, less chance of spreading diseases like black spot, less work to do in spring. On the other hand, leaving architectural perennials like phlomis and eryngium, will create a striking landscape, quite magical on a frosty morning. Overwintering top growth provides shelter for garden friends such as frogs and hedgehogs and provides seeds for the birds. Be aware that some grasses, especially pennisetum, and tender perennials, like shrubby salvias and penstemons, are best left intact until spring, to protect their vulnerable crowns. If you're feeling guilty because a tidy garden is considered to be un-pc in the environmental stakes, compromises can be made: there is always a sheltered corner of your garden where nothing much grows so why not create a log pile with your offcuts as shelter for hedgehogs and toads.

Ornamental grasses, like coppery miscanthus, often look their best against the winter backdrop, but come December can often collapse, their flower heads flying all over the garden, so don't be afraid to cut them down mid-winter. It's worth considering that the earlier in autumn you lift and divide, the more opportunity the roots have to re-establish before the cold weather. Otherwise, the decision is yours.

I'm often asked if cutting back shrubs at the wrong time will cause death by dangerous pruning. Although unlikely, there are a few good reasons why not to prune certain shrubs at this time of year. There is the chance that early frosts could polish them off, reason being that pruning encourages soft, new growth, which is susceptible to freezing temperatures. Most obvious victims of the secateurs would be winter and early spring flowering shrubs, such as camelia or hamamelis, which will be coming into bud now; prune these now and you prune off next season's flowers. Likewise, leave shrubs that produce berries, such as cotoneaster and pyracantha, for winter colour and essential food for birds in the cold months ahead. In theory you should have pruned early blooming shrubs directly after they finished flowering but hey, life often gets in the way! If such a shrub really has outgrown its space by the autumn, then it's a judgement call, compromises are reached, berries or flowers can be sacrificed for one year. The textbooks tell you not to prune dogwoods now, as their coloured stems adorn the bare winter borders, but I see no harm in trimming wayward stems to shape.

Although September may herald the autumn, there is still plenty of opportunity to enliven your gardens and extend the flowering season until the first frosts. Autumn plant fairs proliferate in September, including RHS Wisley, 6 - 11 Sept. www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/wisley/RHS-Garden-Wisley-Flower-Show. Rudbeckias, heleniums, ornamental grasses, knifophias, will provide a welcome boost to your borders. And don't forget there are still Open Gardens to visit through the National Garden Scheme www.ngs.org.uk if you need some inspiration. Moving into October and November, there is perhaps one of the highlights of the gardening year: Autumn Colour. Westonbirt Arboretum has the most dazzling displays of acers and other stunners. www.forestryengland.uk/westonbirt-the-national-arboretum. And as the weather starts to turn, why not take in a lecture or perhaps attend a workshop. Beth Chatto's garden, Elmstead Market in Essex, has an interesting programme: www.bethchatto.co.uk/shop-by-other/courses/.

But whatever you do, make the most of the autumn, it's a long winter ahead.



My favourite Rudbeckias