

SEPTEMBER GARDEN

by
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Untidy! That's the September Garden! Plants that were standing tall and green in August have started listing dangerously to the right or left. Pumpkin leaves are turning yellow. The larkspur has a few scanty blooms left while most of the once beautiful spikes are now brown and messy. The clear walkways of July, almost covered with run-away mint, squash, and oregano plants now make it difficult to get to the planting beds. The dilemma--should we spend valuable harvesting time tidying up the garden, or should we be picking the urgently ripe veggies?

Corn, green beans, peas, and greens have gone to seed, bolted, or succumbed to an army of garden enemies. In addition, something is gnawing on the beets and the birds are pecking the potatoes. Dead, dying, spent blooms or nibbled veggies are very untidy.

To offset this demise, our roses are blooming with new vigor. Pumpkins are turning orange, and zinnias, nasturtiums, and marigolds are at their best. Winter squash, watermelons, and cantaloupe are ripening. I can usually gather a basket of ripe tomatoes daily. There are more squash, cucumbers, and peppers than we can eat, adding to the frustration of not having time to can or freeze the excess. This changed, however, this week when I decided to ignore the other urgent tasks and just start putting things in sterilized pint jars and "water-bath can" them. Now six pints of vermilion tomatoes, six pints of bread and butter pickles, nine pints of dills and five pints of pickled beets proudly occupy space on the counter and in the pantry. Squash and roasted peppers are in the freezer.

Indeed the outcomes of all that spring work are rewarding but sometimes mystifying. Here are some of the seasons' mysteries that perplex me. I ask myself what in the world stripped our corn of

husks and silks devouring every golden kernel? How did our potato vines not bloom, then dry up and die yet produce potatoes? Can we control earwigs, bunnies, birds, Japanese beetles, slugs, and rodents? Mysteries and questions—yes! But the biggest questions revolve around energy, time, and even money. Is the garden really worth all of the hours of hard work that begins in March and continues until frost? Just how much does all this actually cost? Are the sacrifices of other important work and pleasures justified by the harvests of June, July, August, and September? How beneficial or harmful is the digging, weed pulling, hard work, drenching sweat, sun exposure, and body aches? Now that the garden's end is in sight, I place the many assets of the garden on the balance scales. I anxiously await the verdict—will the untidy, sometimes overwhelming liabilities outweigh all the great evidence of the assets of a summer garden?

Gardening certainly has its upsides and downsides. By September we have both enjoyed and bemoaned them both. The satisfaction and joy of picking baskets of fresh produce to eat, preserve, or give away can hardly be overestimated. Knowing that some of this bounty is stored for winter brings an additional sense of accomplishment. Fragrant flowers brighten our home and gladden our heart.