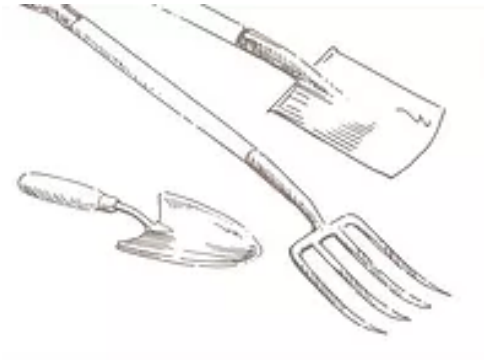
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September Gardening Tips



As we wrap up summer, the most important tip heading into the fall is to protect against wildfire. The wildfire season is already upon us, as temperatures rise through the beginning of fall and the warm, dry Santa Ana winds start to blow from the east, eventually replacing any humid tropical days in Southern California.

If you live in an area prone to wildfires, create defensible space around your home by pruning dead tree limbs, clearing your yard of brush and dead leaves, and removing leaves from the roof and gutters. Defensible space is the 50- to 100-foot area around a house or building where plants (a.k.a. fuel) are trimmed, reduced, or cleared to slow the spread of wildfire.

In California, there are two major planting seasons: spring and fall. One of the best-kept secrets is the beauty of fall planting. September marks the transition to fall and the start of the best planting season of the year. Although the nights may begin to cool off, the days are still warm (with occasional blasts of hot weather). By October, as temperatures cool, it becomes easier to transplant trees, shrubs, and bedding plants. Although trees and shrubs are not actively growing above ground, they are busy sending out strong roots and establishing themselves for the spring and summer.

Soil Tips

The foundation of every good garden is the soil; if you take care of your soil, you won't have to worry about your plants later. The steps and conditions for preparing your soil vary depending on whether you're starting a new planting bed, replanting an existing one, or planting or caring for drought-tolerant, native plants and flowers. Here are a few tips:

Soil Preparation for new beds: Start by turning the soil and watering deeply. Keep watering and wait at least two weeks. The loose, moist soil should germinate most weed seeds. Weed out these opportunists now, and you should have an easier time keeping the bed weed-free later. Continue with the soil preparation steps for existing beds below.

Soil Preparation for existing beds: Loosen the soil and add a three- to four-inch layer of organic material. This can be homemade compost, bagged compost, or planting mix. Add an all-purpose fertilizer and turn it in well. If you have heavy clay soil (as most of us do), add some gypsum; it helps break up the clay. Add about 10 pounds for every 100 sq. ft. This is really the only thing you need to do for soil in a native garden - add gypsum to break up clay. No fertilizer is needed.

To replenish nitrogen in the soil, add bloodmeal, cottonseed meal, or well-composted manure. To replenish phosphorus in the soil, add phosphate or bone meal. Note: Since phosphorus is water-insoluble and nearly immobile in the soil, it should be added now, when it can be thoroughly mixed into the soil. To determine how much of each amendment to add, follow the instructions on the label. After adding all amendments, mix them thoroughly into the soil with a spade or spading fork. Now you're ready to plant your garden!

Soil Preparation for Native, Drought-Tolerant Plants: These plants can be planted year-round; however, fall and winter are ideal for gardeners aiming for great success because of the cooler temperatures and a better chance of rainfall. Soil amendments are not required since natives, especially California natives, are adapted to the natural soils. Gypsum, if anything, to break up clay in the soil is about all you need.

Companion Planting
Often, plants will grow better near certain plants than others or alone. "Companion planting" can drastically improve the use of space, reduce weeds and garden pests by repelling them, and provide protection or an advantage against the elements. This is good news for your garden because it could mean a bigger harvest or more flowers.

Some of the most familiar examples of companion planting come from early Native Americans and, later, full-scale farming, which provides higher crop yields because of the continuously changing nature and biology of the crops and the soil.

Here are a few tips for companion planting:

- Plant short, shade-tolerant plants beneath taller, bushy plants
- Make sure tall sun-loving plants are at the north end of your garden and small ones at the south end to get correct sun exposure
- Plant herbs throughout the garden, especially basil, mint, sage, and dill
- Plant cosmos or marigold to repel pests and introduce beneficial insects such as ladybugs and lacewings that prey on pests
- Rotate your vegetable garden to get two crops instead of one, which will help block out weeds before they have time to settle in

And here are a few “Do Not's” for companion planting:

- Don't mix dill with tomatoes or carrots
- Don't plant garlic, onions, or chives with beans
- Fennel does not mix well with most other plants, even if swallowtail butterflies love it

New Plantings for Gardens
Cool-season Vegetables: Good choices to plant now include broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, kale, kohlrabi, mustard, lettuce, and other greens. Cool-season Flowers: For traditional color and beauty, try calendula, cineraria, dianthus, delphiniums, Iceland poppies, nemesia, pansies, snapdragon, stock, wildflowers, violas, and violets.

Garden Maintenance
Keep camellias well-watered this month. Letting them go dry will cause the buds to drop, depriving you of their beautiful blooms. Some varieties of camellias form more buds than they can support, so they will naturally drop. For the largest flowers, you can start "de-budding" camellias now by removing all but one flower bud from each cluster. Be careful not to remove the growth bud. Growth buds are thin and pointed. Flower buds are round and fat.

Make sure citrus trees are adequately and evenly watered during this month. If the roots go dry, you can get split fruit.

If you want to maintain a "blue" hydrangea or change your hydrangea's color, start now. Once buds begin to form, it is too late. Not all hydrangeas can be made blue. White varieties always stay white, and some pinks turn purple instead of blue.

The "flowers" on your hydrangea are modified leaves called bracts, just like the so-called flowers of poinsettias. You can alter hydrangea bract color by adjusting the soil pH. A more acidic pH of 4.5 to 5.0 yields blue flowers, a near-neutral pH of 5.5 to 6.5 yields mauve, and a more alkaline pH of 7.0 to 7.5 yields pink. Liberal use of compost will also help lower soil pH.

Soils are classified according to their pH value. On a 1-14 scale, a pH of 7 is considered neutral. Most soils have a pH between 5 and 9, with lower values indicating greater acidity and higher values indicating greater alkalinity.

Roses should be encouraged to continue blooming by making sure they get the supplemental food they need. Feeding them becomes the top priority if you want to have cut roses in your home during October, November, and maybe even December. The last feeding for roses should be in early September, no later than midmonth in most areas.

Switch **cymbidiums** to a lower-nitrogen, higher-phosphorus & higher-potassium (NPK) fertilizer to encourage the development of bloom spikes. If your cymbidium leaves are dark green, they are likely in too much shade. Bring them into more light until their leaves turn yellowish.

Give Your Garden A Fall Cleaning
Don't neglect your fall cleanup chores. Remove spent annual flowers and vegetables immediately, as pests and diseases thrive in plant debris. You will be surprised by how thorough garden cleaning reduces insect problems and helps you become fire-wise as well!