Planting: the time is now

Editor of The Garden, Chris Young

Tradition can be an emotive word, but in the gardening world it often speaks volumes. Of course new innovations come along, but at the core of good gardening remain many tried-and-tested, well-established activities.

At the heart of these is when to plant. In this issue of The Garden we unashamedly highlight – by reminding, reaffirming or introducing to people – that autumn planting should be a central part of your annual gardening calendar.

For decades now, and not only due to earlier and warmer springs, many gardeners have been tempted into buying plants at the start of the year, hoping that favourable weather will allow for good establishment. Couple a balmy week in spring with garden centres selling stock in plastic containers earlier in the year, and the temptation to buy is understandable.

Of course, for some plants, spring is the right time to plant. But a quick look round my garden shows that about 80 percent of the plants are fully hardy, with a mix of shrubs, trees, hedges, fruit bushes and herbaceous perennials.

All of these are perfect candidates for autumn planting; indeed anyone purchasing such plants will improve the establishment and growth by getting them in the ground now. With the soil still warm and rain to (hopefully) come during late autumn and winter, their chances are far better than in the spring.

The reason all this matters is twofold: firstly, for healthier, better-growing plants. But also for the visual glory that gardens give. Whether growing border sedums (pp32–35), grasses (pp49–52) or welcoming the vibrant berries of cotoneasters (pp66–69), we all want our gardens to look their best, whatever the season.

Plant now; keep the tradition alive – and make your garden look beautiful.

More on autumn planting:

✤ News: RHS autumn planting campaign, p8
✤ Comment: Nigel Colborn, p21
✤ Garden practice: Toby Buckland, p36
✤ RHS Life: RHS Plant Centre events, p74
For more: www.rhs.org.uk/autumnplanting

Free fertiliser

Author: Mike Grant, Editor, The Plantsman

If you dig the remains of your legume crops back into the soil in autumn, you are probably hoping to capitalise on their nitrogen content. Plants in the pea and bean family (Papilionaceae) are well known for their nitrogen-fixing ability.

Nitrogen is essential to plant life. Most plants get nitrogen from free-living soil bacteria that fix gaseous nitrogen and turn it into compounds that can be absorbed by plant roots. Legumes have evolved the ability to live symbiotically with particular nitrogen-fixing bacteria. These bacteria live in nodules on plant roots and turn gaseous nitrogen from the air into ammonia. The ammonia is absorbed by the plant, and the plant supplies the bacteria with carbohydrate: a mutually beneficial relationship.

Several other plants from unrelated plant families also host nitrogen-fixing bacteria in root nodules. Familiar examples include Alnus, Ceanothus, Coriaria, Datisca, Dryas, Elaeagnus, Hippophae and Myrica. You can perhaps see the connection here – all specialise in growing on poor soils.

Oddly, some legumes don’t fix nitrogen, Styrpholobium (best known in gardens as S. japonicum, pagoda tree) being an example.

✤ The Plantsman is sister publication to The Garden; www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman; 020 7821 3401.
Swimming ponds

As suggested in the fifth part of the Living Gardens series devoted to ponds (The Garden, August, pp72–76), my garden wildlife increased substantially when I excavated two ponds and grew native plants in and around them. Since then I have added a new swimming pond to my garden. It has an area of shallow water, lined with reeds, planted with a mixture of native and non-native plants. The central swimming area has straight sides, dropping to 2m (7ft) at its deepest point.

Interestingly, nearly all the frogs, toads and newts have moved into my new swimming pond. Perhaps this is because they feel safer from herons here, where they can quickly dive into deep water. Has anyone else experienced this? It makes me wonder if we should now be looking at creating our wildlife ponds differently.

Tina Wright, Dorset

Snail control

I have found another way to keep snails from my plants (Comment, July, pp18–19). I applied a mulch of shredded Christmas trees to my hosta bed and, to date, even in the wet months, have had no problem with snails. I have added further coverings annually in spring. Thanks also to high rainfall, the hostas are thought to be free of snails. The nursery from which I purchased plants for this bed was not keen on the idea of using this mulch, concerned about the resin that might leak into the soil. I have been careful to use this mulch only after three years after shredding to avoid these problems and so far have only had good results.

Denis J Heath, Suffolk

One in, one out

Discussing the excessive number of new plants, Nigel Colborn cites David Austin Roses (Comment, August, p21). Our customers would wonder why.

I started breeding English Roses 65 years ago – we now introduce up to five new roses each year. We keep a list of 120 English Roses and, for each new rose, one of similar appearance but inferior quality is removed to avoid an excess in numbers. Roses are the most popular flower in many countries, and the great range is part of their charm. It is the job of garden writers to explain which roses they do and do not like. If there were only a few selections it would not be necessary for them to write anything.

David CH Austin, David Austin Roses, Wolsingham

An easier option?

I cannot agree with Mary Keen that `the wild look’ in gardening is easier to manage than ‘high horticulture’ (Comment, August, p20). Any new gardener with that belief will quickly become disappointed. Both conventional and naturalistic styles require intimate knowledge of plant needs. A successful naturalistic garden creates the illusion that it happened that way, but the gardener is in complete control.

Martin Hughes-Jones, Devon

Martin writes on the naturalistic use of grasses, pp49–52.

Correction

In The Garden, August, p71, damsons ‘Fairlight Damson’ was incorrectly named ‘Fairleigh Damson’. This chance seeding, introduced in about 1880, was found in Fairleigh, Kent.

David CH Austin, David Austin Roses, Wolsingham

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