

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

BY ROGER S. BOLGER
rsbolger@stratos.net



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IN MY GARDEN

Garden activity started to pick up again with the change in weather. The grass in the lawns is growing lush and green again due to moderating temperatures and rain. The crisp night air has been perfect for conversations around the fire pit. Sourwood (*Oxydendron*) leaves are beginning to blaze red, and the ornamental grasses are tickling the sky with their feathery plumes. Fading perennials are beginning to keep me busy tidying up, and the black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia*) flowers are beginning to fade to black seed heads. While the sweet-autumn clematis (*C. paniculata*) is in full bloom, the indigo blue flowers of the Petit Faucon™ clematis (*C. 'Evisix'*) have yielded to the feathery spiraling seed pods.

There are still plenty of flowers in the garden. The bees, butterflies and other insects continue to enjoy the blooms of boneset and joe pye weed (*Eupatorium*). Sedum buds have opened to the delight of bumblebees. The Zuni crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia x indica*) is finally back in bloom, a month later than last year, but I am still waiting for the hardy passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*) to come into flower. Prairiefire crabapple's burgundy fruits are now joined by the golden drops of the Princess crabapple. Chokecherries (*Aronia*) are changing from yellow to red.

Two watermelons are now about six or seven inches across. Tomato plants are about through for the year, after the worst yield I've had in eleven seasons here. I

have dug out several to sow lettuce and radish seeds in their place. The Brown Turkey fig (*Ficus carica*) had its first ripe fig of the fall this week. Golden Delicious apples are nearly ripe, but grapes are just about finished due to black spot.



Hardy Passionflower
Passiflora incarnata

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

PREPARING NEW BEDS

It is simple to convert sections of lawn to garden beds at this time of year. One way is to cover the area with thick layers of newspaper, at least ten pages thick, which will smother the grass and any weeds underneath. Next, cover the newspaper with grass clippings or compost to help the newspaper deteriorate quickly. Finally, cover the area with good quality topsoil, at least a half-inch deep. By spring, the grass and weeds underneath will be dead, the newspaper will have rotted, and the bed will be ready for planting.

FEATURED TREE

OXYDENDRON ARBOREUM

One of my favorite small trees is the sourwood. The name refers to the tree's preference for acid or sour soils, which is typical of other members of the heath family (*Ericaceae*), including blueberries, rhododendron, azalea and Japanese andromeda (*Pieris*). It is also known as lily-of-the-valley tree, a more fitting name as its small white flowers are borne in long chains. The flowers are slightly fragrant but not nearly as strong as the true lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*). Sourwood blooms in late June or early July, long after most other flowering trees. The flowers soon become tiny seed pods on the same chains, and they are most striking when set against the brilliant vermillion fall foliage. This tree is sure to draw the eye in autumn, as well as neighbors asking, "what kind of tree is that?"

Sourwood is a slow-growing tree, so while it takes many years to reach full size, it will not outgrow its location. It performs best when it is planted young, as its shallow roots resent any disturbance. Choose a location in full sun for best flowering and fall coloration, or part shade if necessary. It is critical that this tree is planted in well-drained soil, as it will not tolerate wet feet.

I have under planted my sourwood with perennials so I don't have to risk damaging the roots when I dig holes for annual flowers. I planted leadwort (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*) directly under the tree because it is a ground-covering plant whose glossy leaves also turn red. Its royal blue flowers contrast with the red foliage, and also with the light yellow flowers of the nearby Moonbeam coreopsis. Little Bunny fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) rounds out the combination with their round globes of green punctuated by miniature foxtail plumes.



Sourwood in 2004 with leadwort and Little Bunny fountain grass

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

FALL IS FOR PLANTING

If you are thinking about adding new perennials, shrubs or trees to your landscape, you don't have to wait for spring to get started. This is an excellent time of year to install new plants. For one thing, your ideas are fresh in your mind now, and few gardeners write down their plans. When spring arrives, there will be so much to do and so many new plants to try, it is likely that some or all of this year's ideas will be forgotten.

Second, conditions are excellent for root establishment in autumn. The air is cool, but the soil is warm, encouraging root growth. An insulating blanket of snow could allow roots to grow well into December. Botany works in favor of fall planting, too, because plants are naturally directing their

energy and growth downward into the roots for use next spring. Do not fertilize these new plants, or you could cause a late-season growth spurt on the top parts of the plant that will compete with the roots for nutrients, and is unlikely to mature and harden off before a killing frost.

Finally, garden centers are trying to reduce their inventories of plants in the fall, so there are often great bargains to be had. Pricy specimen trees and shrubs are the first to be snapped up by savvy shoppers as soon as they go on sale. What better way to treat yourself to a gorgeous budget-buster than to get one cheap in the fall?

TURF TALK

MUSHROOMS

Mushrooms have been popping in up in area lawns lately. These fungal growths are actually the equivalent of a flower – it is a structure for reproduction that produces spores. The main part of the fungus is the fibrous network of thread-like mycelia that colonize decomposing organic matter. When there is ample moisture and moderate temperatures, the fungus is able to send up mushrooms in an attempt to spread its spores and inhabit new areas.

Mushrooms often appear where a tree once stood, as the parent fungus is hard at work converting the old roots or stump into rich soil. Sometimes builders will bury scrap wood and other construction debris near a house, resulting in a patch that sprouts mushrooms each year. A thick buildup of thatch can also harbor fungus that produces mushrooms. Sometimes the mushrooms will appear in a circle that spreads several inches each year. The intense fungal activity can sometimes cause the grass to turn dark green or brown at the perimeter of the circle where the mushrooms appear. This phenomenon is called Fairy Ring because it was once believed that dancing fairies produced the

circle, especially when the mushrooms “magically” appeared overnight.



Fairy Ring

Mushrooms, though produced by fungi, are not the same kind of fungi that sometimes cause lawn diseases. However, they are unsightly and may cause concern that children or pets may eat them. There is no treatment that will kill mushrooms or the underlying fungus. The temporary solution is to physically remove the mushrooms or knock them over so they will quickly dry up. The permanent solution is to remove the decaying organic matter. In the case of thatch, core aerating the lawn will help the thatch decay quickly without producing mushrooms. Removing underground wood is likely to do more damage to the lawn than the mushrooms. Cold, very hot or dry weather will bring an end to the mushroom season, but it is likely they will reappear for years each time the conditions are right.

It is fun to try to identify the mushrooms that grow in the yard with the help of a field guide. I resist the urge to learn about which mushrooms are poisonous and which are edible so I am not tempted to test my knowledge. The consequences of eating a misidentified mushroom include organ failure and death, so I prefer to stick to store-bought cultivated mushrooms, and I urge you to do the same. Even experts with years of experience sometimes make a fatal mistake.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

DIVIDING PERENNIALS

Fall is a good time to divide out perennial plants that have become overgrown and crowded. Look closely at the bunch of plant material and you will see that the leaves and stems arise from several distinct locations. Each of these clusters of stems or leaves forms a "crown," which can become a separate individual plant. If the plant arises from a single stem, it can not be divided. If there is a single point that radiates stems and leaves, it is best to leave the plant in place until you see multiple crowns.

If there are several distinct crowns, dig out the clump several inches out from the stems to get as much of the root mass as possible. Separate the crowns with a sharp knife if the cluster is small, or a spade on large clumps. Drive it straight through the root ball to detach a new plant. Tough-rooted plants, especially ornamental grasses, may require a saw to divide out individual crowns.

Plant the divisions as soon as possible so the roots can begin to recover. If you want to save them for later or give some away, pot them up in plastic pots right away so the roots do not dry out. Water the divisions immediately after planting or potting, and monitor them closely, since the divisions have lost a considerable amount of roots. It is best to avoid fertilizing plant divisions in the fall because the fertilizer may encourage new green

leafy growth on the top of the plant that will not endure frost. Let the plant concentrate its growth on the root system to improve its chances of surviving the winter.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Sow a cover crop when declining vegetables are cleared. They will stabilize the soil and add nutrients when tilled under in early spring.
- Pot up culinary herbs to bring indoors for winter cooking.
- Fertilize perennials for the last time this year.
- Divide and reset perennials before the month is out.
- This is your last chance to relocate perennials until spring.
- Sow grass seed by September 30th.
- Prepare room in your storage areas for garden furniture, tools and ornaments.
- Fertilize houseplants for the final time until next April.
- Lawns with compacted soil or over ½ inch of thatch should be core aerated when the soil is soft and damp.
- Compost non-diseased fallen leaves, clippings and garden debris.
- Let winter squash, pumpkins and gourds ripen on the vine, but harvest before frost.
- Harvest potatoes two weeks after tops die back.
- Keep up with your weeding. Fewer seeds this year means fewer weeds next year.



ROGER S. BOLGER HAS OVER TEN YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL HORTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND HAS GARDENED ALL HIS LIFE IN NORTHEAST OHIO. HE HAS GIVEN DOZENS OF GARDENING TALKS AND SPECIALIZES IN WOODY PLANTS, PERENNIALS, TURF, ENTOMOLOGY, INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT, ORGANIC GARDENING, PONDS AND BACKYARD WILDLIFE.

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