

TULSA WORLD

Time is now to prep for fall planting

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When Master Gardener Bill Sterling thinks of fall, one of the first things that comes to mind is the respite he'll get from the hot weather.

"I'm tired from the summer... After a whole summer getting in the heat to pick, it's hard to drag yourself out there and put plants in."

And it's still hot.

While some cool weather crops should have been put in the ground - your leafy lettuce and beans and broccoli, for instance - Sterling is waiting a little bit, probably until about mid-September, to get out and begin his fall gardening.

"But right now is when you need to be doing it."

He just can't bring himself to pull out the plants that are still producing, including his okra, peppers and eggplant. Because this summer has been relatively mild compared to those in previous years, Sterling and other gardeners can expect to be harvesting their warm weather crops until about Halloween, said Emmie Sherry of Southwood Landscape and Garden Center.

At some point, though, Sterling will be making room for turnips, kale, radish and spinach - veggies he's excited to grow. The fact that he'll be saving money by raising his own salad crops is motivation enough to get out there.

And once he does, it's going to be smooth sailing.

Fall gardening is his preference because gardening in the springtime can be pretty fickle, he said.

Fall is more predictable.

"This spring was an example of everything that could go wrong," Sterling said.

First there was that freeze warning in early May. Then there was the cool, monsoon-like rain. And then it was hot and dry.

For the first-time gardener especially, Sterling cannot stress enough the importance of prepping your soil before getting into your gardening work. He works with his soil on an ongoing basis, but if you have tarried in incorporating organic

material (compost or manure) into your soil, get to it, Sterling said.

"If you start with good soil, everything else is easier. With bad soil, you're behind the eightball from the start."

Preparing your garden means first cleaning up spent plants and dead debris that can be a breeding ground for insect pests and disease. In clearing away these old plants, you're not only making room for your fall crops, but also leaving little opportunity for garden nuisances to stick around.

Call the Tulsa County-OSU Extension Center to find out if soil solarization might be a good idea for you. During this time of year, but not much further out, it may help to lay a clear sheet of plastic over a well-tilled garden bed. With the weather as warm as it is right now, it will get even warmer under the covering. The sunlight kills weed seeds and many diseases and insect pests.

Next you'll want to toughen up your soil by adding organic material such as compost to your garden bed.

"Whatever the problem is with your soil, the answer is always adding organic matter," Sterling said.

If you haven't been working your compost bin, there are any number of alternatives. Nature's Blend by Back to Nature works well, said Sue Welch, co-owner of The Garden Trug, 3009 E. 101st St. It's organic, doesn't burn plants and works in the soil easily.

If you'll want to see such spring blooms as tulips, it's a good idea to plant these bulbs now for a pretty show when the warm weather returns. It's not quite time to put in your cool weather annuals - like mums and pansies. Though you might see some popping up at your local grocer and box store, you won't want to plant these until about two weeks from now, Welch said.

In the meantime, consider other ways to bring color interest to your yard, in the form of Swiss Chard - which Welch loves in soup - and purple ornamental grass with "blooming" seed heads, she added.

You might just now be starting to think about your garden but better late than never.

Vegetables will add decoration, as well as function, to your landscape so consult the extension center's fall planting guide at tulsaworld.com/osufallgardening (<http://tulsaworld.com/osufallgardening>), Sterling said.

Once the weather lets up a bit, that's what he'll be looking at.

Yard prep for the fall

RepairClinic.com's Jeff Linderman, an in-house landscaping expert, says doing some end-of-summer yard work can dramatically improve the health of your yard.

Spread the work out over a few weekends and save yourself some time and energy later, Linderman said.

"Doing this work now will provide a healthier yard when spring arrives and reduce maintenance required in (the) fall."

Sue Welch, co-owner of The Garden Trug, offers her top tip for the fall: Plant new trees, shrubs and perennials and feed existing ones. "Also, add mulch for winter insulation."

Here are a few more tasks you can start doing now for your yard and more so as the weather cools down.

Make repairs to your lawn: The end of summer makes for the perfect opportunity to reseed bare patches and revitalize dry spots before temperatures fall and lawn growth slows down, Linderman says.

Perk up and even out mulch: Redistributing mulch will help water get to plant roots faster and by evening out mulch around trees, leaving a few inches of space between the mulch and tree, you'll discourage pests.

Remove dead debris from perennials: Clearing dead leaves and fallen fruit from your perennials' living space reduces pest appeal, Linderman says.

Still have debris? Take the dried leaves you pick up, as well as twigs and branches, and repurpose them for mulch using a wood chipper.

Plant your spring bulbs: Doing this now will allow a longer period for their roots to strengthen, Linderman says.

Gardening challenge

We asked Sue Welch, co-owner of The Garden Trug, what the intermediate or highly-skilled gardener should try doing this fall. She said to plant a hardy-fruit bearing tree or shrub like Brown Turkey fig. Or try a citrus tree or shrub that can be brought indoors by a sunny window when temps go below 50 degrees. Japanese hanging Kokedama is a fun indoor winter project; classes on it are available.

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Aster MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World



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Green cabbage MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World



Purple cabbage MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World



A fall flower pot at The Garden Trug is painted like a jack-o'-lantern. MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World

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