

Tricks and Treats

Treats abound! As well as the expected grace notes in falling leaves, we have the last of the roses, not May-perfect perhaps but still blooming and still fragrant. They wave over our heads tangled in the soft red of the dogwoods. Asters, chrysanthemums, lantanas, grasses - all of them ignore seasonal deadlines with impunity.

The deep green foliage of the camellias has been a cool background during the glare and heat of summer and they have now come into their own time of splendor. They are decked in color with buds promising to brighten the months ahead. Camellias are comfortable in Tidewater easily grown, undemanding, and generous with exquisite flowers. Most cultivars are eventually large but not as large as trees that may threaten the roof of your house.

As for tricks, they can be clever and fun or an addition to those 'to-do' lists that lure gardeners out of doors in all seasons. Too tricky by far are the invasives! Somehow we keep planting them and this is a good time to thin them out before they take over your small world. They are considered more detrimental in the South than they are in our Mid-Atlantic region but since we seem to be becoming more southern it might be good to keep an eye on them.

Several of them are ubiquitous groundcovers. First there is *Euonymus fortunei*, winter creeper. It is an attractive evergreen shrub to about three feet tall but it also climbs by its aerial roots along the stem. Before I knew better, I planted one long ago that I dug out when the vines dangled from the rafters in the garage. Equally attractive and even more damaging is *Hedera helix*, English ivy, capable of climbing 90 feet. It escapes easily into the woods where its behavior is lethal. The third vine we have everywhere in Virginia is *Vinca*, the common periwinkle. This becomes rampant just by spreading as the pretty blue flowers set seed infrequently.

While not a groundcover, *Ligustrum*, both Chinese and European privet, is a really potent invasive. Small white flowers and dark berries do not redeem it: it can erupt into a hard-to-remove shrub in a single season. When you can't dig it out but want to apply a herbicide, glyphosate (Round-up) is recommended. However, you can't just spray away when it has invaded near plants you value. In those cases, cut out the shrub and paint the stumps with the herbicide. In places where you can spray, use a string trimmer first to damage the foliage. That will make the plant more efficient at absorbing the spray, which is designed to travel from leaves to roots.

In the everlasting quest for simplicity, (translation = anti-stuff), I have been attempting to melt the blizzard of paper poking out of gardening books. Lots of strange tricks surfaced. One curiosity is a recipe to increase the blooms on flowering shrubs. This concoction for use in early spring can be mixed in a sprayer container: 1 cup of liquid fertilizer, ½ cup of fish emulsion, 2 tablespoons of hydrogen peroxide, 4 tablespoons of dish soap, ½ cup of ammonia and a glass of beer. You may have other plans for the beer as I can't think why plants would need it.

And a trick for planting a rose: soak it in a bucket of water for a few hours before planting. One successful rose grower soaks even those roses sold in a package intended to be planted without being unwrapped. He strips away all the packaging and after soaking, he plants the rose in a wide shallow hole. Coconut fiber can be incorporated into the soil and a cone formed to spread the roots around. I presume he distrusts the ability of the roots to work their way out of the package. Actually, in following this advice, I was not surprised to find when

unbundled, that the package contained two frail roses, not one healthy one. They are alive but cannot be described as flourishing.

If you were disappointed in last summer's tomato crop, with leaves browning and production sagging, it may be time to go on a weed watch. Those pathogens that lurk in the dead garden can return next year if they find a host for the winter. The tomato belongs to the solanaceae family along with potato, pepper, eggplant, tomatillo, okra and petunia. However, even if all those crops are gone and cleared away, the pathogens may be hiding in weeds that belong to the solanaceae family such as nightshade, jimson weed, buffalobur, ground cherry, horsenettle, and henbane. And pull the petunia residue from the flowerbeds. Virginia Tech advises a program of crop rotation to interrupt the cycle of infestation. They also promote the use of cover crops that add nitrogen and build up the soil as well.

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