

A Pickup for the Dog Days

This is the time in high summer when the containers - big and little pots, old wheelbarrows, broken birdbaths – that looked so merry in the month of May have lost their charm. There is no law preventing you from pulling out the tired plants and redesigning the contents. To begin, refresh the planting mix.

The addition of a shake of time-release fertilizer, a pint of crumbled and soaked coir, and a quart of new potting soil will serve a large pot. You may have a few chrysanthemums that are budded but not blooming that you could transplant: if you keep them in shade for a few days and water them well they will happily bloom deep into fall. You probably have yards of variegated vinca that needs to be thinned out which would be happy to trail over the edges of your pots.

You can of course have great fun trying the extremes in exotic plant choices but there is no fault in playing it safe, using the tried and true in concocting container collections. For example, the reason we see so much of the limey-green sweet potato vine, *Ipomoea batatas* 'Margarita', is because it IS spectacular, a wonderful color with the reds and roses of fuchsia, begonia, and the wildest coleus.

Another old familiar is *Helichrysum petiolare*, the grey foliaged vine that enhances the rich plums and purples, pinks and blues of such things as verbena and petunia. If your container needs height, you can replant a canna for the centerpiece or even cut off a wedge of a grass of which you already have a clump in your garden. Gladioli corms that you forgot to plant would make a pretty contrast to the low growers., even if their reign is short.

If the plants available commercially are even more tired than your own, walk about your garden and see what can be borrowed for a time. You can always put it back at the end of autumn when you must put the more fragile pots into the garage. Ajuga makes good foliage filling, providing curious shapes and tones that blend well.

One plant that will go along with your plans is coleus. This plant, *Solenostemon* is actually a cold-tender perennial that we use as an annual. It is easily rooted this time of year either in water or in small pots. I had a 'houseplant' coleus that I cut and rooted so I could use its pot for something else. Those cuttings surround a bit of salvaged *Miscanthus* 'Morning Light' in pots where pansies perished. I was surprised how quickly they grew. The *Miscanthus* has vanished in the middle but grasses are slow to get established and they will be there when the billowing coleus is frost killed. I expect the pots really did not need that scoop of chicken manure?

Connections

Do you love a bit of honey with your bread? I was speaking to a friend about our mutual preference for local honey and how fortunate we are that there are hundreds of backyard bee hives in our area – especially appropriate for Gloucester County, whose historical emblem is a skep, a straw beehive.

My friend assured me that eating local honey was healthier than randomly gathered kinds just because it was local. Decades ago there was a lot of research done on the health benefits of honey but like other anecdotal references, they aren't scientific proof of anything as you don't know if you were about to feel better anyway! It was hailed as a way to lesson childhood asthma by providing a buildup of the pollens that might trigger the asthma. It was widely published that if you or your children have allergies, local honey is a way of introducing substances into one's system that will lesson those allergic reactions. Before prednisone, asthma sufferers used to shoot themselves with a concoction of whatever they were allergic to, silk, wool, grass, etc. It worked. Honey is surely easier to take than shots.

The collapse of honeybee hives has been a disaster in Europe as well as here. After the hedgerows were eliminated to facilitate using larger farm machinery, crops depended on cultured bee colonies instead of wild bees for pollination. France banned a particular pesticide, imidacloprid, holding it responsible for honeybee collapse. Germany, Italy, and Slovenia followed by banning clothianidin, another neonicotinoid pesticide.

These synthetic poisons mimic nicotine's ability to disrupt insect nervous systems. Bayer Crop-Science introduced it to the US in 2003. It was a coincidence that US bee colonies decreased by 30 to 90% after that but we know a coincidence is not a cause. It may make us wonder a bit and be grateful for the bees we have.