

## Just Deal With It!

Meeting a fellow gardener in the grocery store one morning we spoke of plants, pests, drought, and heat. She told me her grandfather's response to all such complaints was, "Just deal with it!" How sensible and it made me wonder if, lured by the promises and pictures of perfection that surround us, we have acquired the notion that we are entitled to a perfect patch of Eden. Perhaps we need to be reminded to stop moaning about what we have been dealt and just cope.

The one attribute the writers of books about gardens share is their successfulness. Wilderness succumbs to order; mildewed plants emerge picture perfect; bad bugs move to the neighbors. However, "Gardening in Eden", despite the book's title, details failures. Such a comfort!

Arthur T. Vanderbilt II writes: "the ragged end of the season and the garden is overgrown, frowsy, weary. It doesn't care anymore and we don't either." You notice he left out 'weedy' in his lament. It is a plus that weeds provide the excuse to escape outside on lovely fall days. Your reward may be sighting a yellow bloom on the forsythia, a woodpecker on the oak or Rhododendron 'PJM' in full glory. The big book says it blooms early in the season but Halloween?

Don't we love the tough survivors, those roses that refuse to quit, sending out small reminders of what could have been last summer before defeated by drought. Never winning a best-in-show, the Knock Out family greets November with rich green foliage and a few gentle blooms of red, coral and yellow. A small grace note is the lingering pink phlox flowering against the burgundy foliage of the dogwood and brightening a patch of blackened rudbeckias.

The chrysanthemums that usually bloom in late September kept their buds tight until late October. Nor are they as tall this year. I have a spread of daisy-faced, single amber/coral mums that was expected to reach into the wands of pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) but is a charming tangle at its foot. Another native grass, *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'The Blues' that was a steely blue has now lost its blue and sports a fluffy mass of pale tan atop the tan stems.

Were I forced to reduce the garden to trees and shrubs alone, grasses would be the last to go. Seeing early morning dew caught in their seed heads gives them eminent domain. Grasses are a fine contrast to sprawling juniper and give movement to spaces stacked with more static plants. They complement the tall asters and ease the formality of the early camellias.

Some varieties take their sweet time producing a clump. I was tempted to weed away the runt of the litter of three when I planted 'The Blues', but after their second summer of neglect they are blooming well in wretched soil where the hose doesn't reach.

One of the best things about gardening in Tidewater is that there really is no dead time of year. There is always something to be seen and enjoyed. Spring of course is the prima donna season with an extravagance of color but there is something deeply satisfying about a walk in winter woods. Even without the reds and golds of autumn the trees are worth attention for their bark and architecture. Winter is the best time to study your own acre or fraction thereof. Without the distraction of myriad shades of green you can see the bones. You can more easily see what should be delegated to the compost pile and what plants need more TLC.

November, that ever-shortening span between Halloween and Thanksgiving is a really great month to garden if you can snatch the time. For one thing the weeds stay pulled. Even if they have flung a million seeds, you can discourage germination by mulching the ground. Mulching can prevent some of your favorites, such as larkspur, from seeding themselves so you have to decide which spots to leave bare and which to cover. Although serious winter pruning should wait for dormancy, removing dead, damaged branches from trees and shrubs will keep you happy outside while dirty dishes pile up inside.