Asparagus and Rhubarb in the Autumn Season

Harvest is long past but now is the time asparagus and rhubarb plants build up needed reserves for the next year. Be sure to water during dry weather and keep plants free of weeds. Foliage should be left until all green is gone. It can then be removed or left for the winter to help collect snow. (WU)

Time to Plant Spring-flowering Bulbs

Late September through October is an excellent time to plant spring-flowering bulbs such as crocus, tulips and daffodils. These plants need to develop roots in the fall and must meet a chilling requirement over the winter in order to bloom in the spring.

Choose a planting site that has full sun to partial shade. The ideal soil would be a sandy loam, but even poor soils can be used if organic material such as peat moss, compost, or aged bark is mixed in. For example, a heavy clay can be amended by mixing in one-third to one-half organic material. Soil pH should be between 6.0 and 7.0.

Bulbs need good aeration as well as good drainage for proper development. It is best if the bulbs
are given 12 inches of prepared soil. If one-third organic material were added, this would require mixing 4 inches of organic material with 8 inches of soil. Incorporate about five tablespoons of a complete fertilizer such as a 10-10-10 during preparation or fertilize according to soil test.

Planting depths vary depending on the size of the bulbs. For example, tulips and hyacinths are set about 6 inches deep, and daffodils are put 6 to 8 inches deep. Smaller bulbs are planted shallower. As a rule of thumb, bulbs are planted two to three times as deep as their width. Planting depth is the distance from the bottom of the bulb to the top of the soil.

Large bulbs are normally spaced 4 to 6 inches apart, and small bulbs about 1 to 2 inches. Planting in clumps or irregular masses produces a better display than planting singly.

After placing the bulbs at the proper depth, replace half the soil and add water. This will settle the soil around the bulbs and provide good bulb/soil contact. Add remaining soil and water again. Although there will be no top growth in the fall, the roots are developing, so soil should be kept moist but not wet. Mulch can be added after soil has frozen to prevent small bulbs from being heaved out by alternate freezing and thawing. (WU)

**ORNAMENTALS**

**Grow a Mighty Oak From a Little Acorn!**

This fall's bumper crop of acorns has many folks wondering how to handle the seeds to produce an oak seedling. The biggest difference is that unlike most seeds, acorns MUST NOT be allowed to dry out! If you collected some acorns a couple of weeks ago, and left them in a paper bag or just sitting on a shelf, the embryo in the seed has already died from desiccation, and the acorn will not germinate. If this describes your current acorn handling, go out now and collect some acorns that have been lying in the grass or under fallen leaves. Float-test the seeds in a bucket of water, and keep only those that sink. The floaters have already gotten dried out, or a weevil has eaten much of the seed inside.

The easiest way to grow oak seedlings is to plant the acorn this fall either in a garden bed or in the location in the landscape where you want an oak tree. If it is from the white oak group (bur, post, white, chinkapin) the acorn will germinate immediately, producing a root this fall, but the top will not appear until next spring. Acorns from the red oak group (pin, red, black, blackjack, Shumard) will not sprout this fall, but do require a cool moist period, called stratification, before germination in the spring. Simply plant 3 to 4 acorns about 2 inches deep in each location where you want an oak tree, and later thin them out to a single seedling per spot. If sowing them in a garden bed, plant the acorns at least 4 inches apart for ease of digging and transplanting later.

If you have a green thumb, you may want to try raising oak seedlings in a container. In this case, store the acorn in a plastic bag in the refrigerator until ready for planting. Any type of pot can work, but a square container is best, as it prevents the oak's long roots from circling the pot walls,
resulting in a girdling root. Cardboard quart or pint drink containers with several large diameter holes in the bottom work well. Typical houseplant or seed starting potting mixes are good. Plant the acorns next February or March, so the seedlings are not germinating in the low light conditions of mid winter.

The best locations for growing your potted seedlings are outside, in partial shade, i.e., the east side of a building. This will mimic the field edge environment that young oaks grow best in. Trying to grow oak seedlings inside is more difficult, but can be accomplished on the sill of an unobstructed south window. During shoot-growth flushes, the pots will need to be turned almost daily to prevent a crook from forming in the stem as the seedling grows toward the light. It is best to keep the seedlings in the container just one growing season, and plant the seedling out in the landscape next fall or overwinter in a sheltered location and plant next spring. (CB)

**Pine Wilt Cycle**

We have been receiving calls about green, healthy pine trees that have suddenly taken on the scotched appearance associated with pine wilt disease. At this time, the recommendation is to identify trees that have died suddenly, cut them down and drag them to a burn pile. Burning the trees destroys the larvae of the next generation of pine sawyer beetles. Most of the next generation of beetles will emerge beginning in mid-May, 2011. Burning any time between now and April 1 will help eliminate developing borer larvae. This task can be accomplished during winter when there is a lull in fieldwork. (BB)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**Moving Houseplants Inside for the Winter**

Many people with houseplants move some of them outside for the summer to give them better growing conditions and help them recover from the stress of an indoor environment. But as fall approaches and night temperatures approach 50 F, it is time to think about bringing plants inside for the winter.

Plants that have spent the summer outside should be inspected for insects and disease before bringing them inside. A sharp spray from a garden hose can remove insects or mites from houseplant foliage. Insects in the potting soil can be forced out by soaking the pot in a tub of lukewarm water for about 15 minutes.
Houseplants that have been kept outdoors are accustomed to receiving much more sunlight than they do indoors. So how do we help houseplants acclimatize to the lower light levels inside? Houseplants brought in from outside should be started out in an area of the home that receives plenty of light, and then gradually moved to their permanent, darker location. This process should take four to eight weeks depending on the degree of difference in light levels between the initial and final location of the plant.

Understanding plant processes allows us to anticipate potential problems. Acclimatization gives houseplants a greater chance of retaining leaves and avoiding the stress of completely replacing them. (WU)

**Ornamental Sweet Potatoes**

We often receive the question as to whether ornamental sweet potatoes are safe to eat. The answer is yes. Note that they are chosen for ornamental qualities rather than taste and so may not have the quality of our traditional types. (WU)

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