

## September 2020 Gardener's Corner

By Cate White, SJ County Master Gardener

One of my favorite morning rituals is to step into my backyard, coffee cup in hand, and meander through my garden to see how the plants are faring, what might need attention, and observe the various critters inhabiting my yard. Particularly in these times of social distancing, gardens can be a source of nurture and solace.

At this time of year, I am also closely examining each plant. A garden is ever changing; plants may grow too large and crowd out others near them, or begin to shade sun-loving neighbors. Some plants may be thriving and look beautiful, while others may have become spindly or sickly. Late summer and all of fall is the perfect time for refurbishing your yard. Replace or move unhappy plants, thin out overgrown areas, and add new or transplanted plants to fill in bare spots. Be ruthless in these assessments since removing a plant that needs continual nursing along now will save a great deal of time in the future.

When considering making changes, think about attracting birds and pollinators. Planting various sages, penstemons, perennial herbs and other plants that provide nectar encourages Hummingbirds to be regular visitors. Birds, bees and butterflies are also attracted to these plants. Other birds such as Robins, Doves, Finches, Sparrows, Bluebirds and Black Crested Phoebes will come to visit if there are a few insects and flowers that have gone to seed for them feed on. A small fountain or birdbath also attracts birds. Having wildlife to observe will enhance the pleasure of being in your yard.



***Hummingbird Feeding on Lavender***

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***Praying Mantis on a Heliotrope Blossom***

Photo by Cate White



***Butterflies on Perennial Statice***

Photo by Cate White

Keep in mind the principle of “Right Plant, Right Place” when contemplating adding new plants. In order for plants to thrive, they should be planted where their requirements for sun, water, soil type, weather conditions and space are met. Consult with a knowledgeable nurseryman or the Sunset Western Garden Book to learn what a specific plant’s needs may be. For example, camellias, azaleas, hydrangeas and gardenias prefer slightly acidic soil. Our soil is on the alkaline side, so be prepared to amend it with peat moss and plenty of compost where you intend to put these plants, and know that they are likely to need more pampering than plants that are happy in our native soil. All these plants also need shade from our hot afternoon sun. Some plants, such as Japanese Maples and Citrus trees suffer in windy areas, so plant them where they will be sheltered from strong winds. Remember it’s best to place plants with similar requirements together.

According to the USDA, we are in hardiness zone 9, while Sunset’s system puts us in zone 14, so think twice if you fall in love with a plant in a nursery located outside our area, such as on the coast or in southern California. Upon being transferred here it is likely to suffer shock, may not get its requirements met, and consequently not do well. Lastly, know your plant’s growth habits. If it is destined to become a large specimen, make sure to give it plenty of space. Constant cutting back will stress the plant, and an oversized plant can crowd out its neighbors competing for light, air and soil nutrients, leading you to end up with plants that are subject to rot and insect infestation. So, enjoy your garden, then do a little research, explore a few nurseries, roll up your sleeves and get to work renewing it!

### **September Garden Checklist**

- Continue monitoring and adjusting your irrigation system according to weather conditions.
- Keep controlling for mosquitoes, ants and yellow jackets. Use *Bacillus Thuringiensis* Israelensis to prevent mosquitoes from breeding in ponds, fountains or birdbaths. Use baits for ants and yellow jackets.
- Watch for aphids, white flies, caterpillars and spider mites, and control using methods such as spraying with water, insecticidal soap or neem oil. Bt is effective on caterpillars including Tomato worms.
- Prune evergreens and summer flowering shrubs. Remove any fruit mummies (shrunken dried out fruit) from fruit trees.
- Start planting flowering winter annuals, cool season vegetables, perennials, trees and foundation shrubs beginning in mid-September. Divide and replant overgrown perennials such as daylilies, coreopsis and yarrow.
- Continue to harvest and enjoy your summer vegetables, removing plants that have stopped producing or have become sickly.