

Fall gardening: Having fun breaking some rules

BY KEN MOORE

Unquestionably, fall is for planting and engaging in numerous other gardening activities. Fall is so filled with cool breezes, brilliant foliage, a feast of flowers and wild critters active everywhere that I tend to break the conventional rules of fall gardening so that I have more time for simply enjoying the gradual transition into winter.

Considering myself a wild gardener in a wild landscape, I wander around taking credit for beautiful effects of my abandonment. The lingering rhubarb-red stems of pokeberry, *Phytolacca Americana*; the lasting-through-winter, rusty-red seed cones of smooth sumac, *Rhus glabra*; the blinding golden-yellow flower masses of perennial goldenrods, *Solidago spp.*; and annual bur marigolds, *Bidens aristosa*, along the edges are all the result of refusal to pull every weedy-looking plant in sight during the long hot summer. At the end of the summer,



PHOTO BY KEN MOORE

The classic wildflower of fall is goldenrod, of which there are numerous wild species and horticultural cultivars, and it does not cause hay fever.

fall rules

SPECIAL GARDENING SECTION

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ON THE COVER:



Buckeye Butterfly BY KIRK ROSS



THE GARDEN BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

After a short drive from town up to the Orange Grove/Dairyland region of southwestern Orange County, two plant experts and this reporter encountered a couple of very special strips of roadside.

A unique and, hopefully, soon-to-be-repeated-elsewhere effort on the part of local botanists and conservation types, Piedmont Electric and the state Department of Transportation has preserved a wonderful array of wild plants. These short strips of Do Not Mow/Do Not Spray are Piedmont Prairie remnants — examples of the dwindling landscape

that was once abundant in our area and some of the last places in Orange County where you can find species that each day become rarer in the Piedmont.

So the next time you're cruising up Orange Grove or Buckhorn and you notice the side of the road is suddenly bursting with color and rich in variety, tip your hat to the groups, individuals (including the Botanical Garden's Johnny Randall), government agencies and corporations that took the time to cooperate to save a little bit of the past and, perhaps, point us toward a better future. —KIRK ROSS

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I even let the vines of morning glories *Ipomoea purpurea*, scramble wherever they may to provide more floriferous mornings than I could ever design and manage on my own.

The rule of “fall is for planting” is wisely directed to a fall vegetable garden. The challenge is to get the beds prepared and the seed in the ground as early as mid-August, a time when most folks are hiding out in the shade. Later planting can be effective, but one needs to obtain fall vegetable seedlings, abundant at the farmers’ market and garden centers, to set directly out into the ground. Even as late as mid-September, you’ll have some winter harvest from plants set into the ground.

If it’s too late for you to prepare garden beds, then do as this lazy gardener does and plant vegetable seedlings in pots on the patio or deck. Remember that sunlight and regular watering are required. Our winters are becoming so mild that with a protective covering of light-weight cloth during the hardest of freezes, the fall garden will produce well into the late winter, when it will be time to plant the early-spring veggies.

Planting hardy perennials and deciduous trees and shrubs in the fall is fine as long as you remember to water regularly during dry spells, even during the winter months. I have learned to avoid planting, particularly transplanting, evergreens in the fall. It is very easy to lose the evergreens from fall planting because they may not recover without adequate new root growth to sustain them through the long winter weeks of drying winds and sun. The optimal time to plant evergreens is mid-February to mid-March, allowing the plants a much shorter span of time to be stressed by desiccating winds and sun while growing sufficient new roots to survive.



PHOTO BY KEN MOORE

Colorful morning glories are allowed to scramble wherever they please in the fall..

The rule of “putting the garden to bed for the winter” is one I do not follow. If you have a few really fragile perennials or shrubs that are so disease- and insect-prone that you need to provide them hospital-clean surroundings, then do what you have to do. There are so many wonderful easy-to-grow plants that I just don’t spend time on the fragile ones. That’s my choice. I marvel at the gardeners who prune back, rake and mulch entire planting areas in laborious preparation for the winter. That is a pleasurable endeavor for tidy gardeners. I wonder if they ever tire of looking at that continuous tidy

landscape throughout the winter? I prefer to leave standing the seed-bearing stems of the asters, goldenrods, Joe-Pye weeds and the pod-laden branches of Baptisias and countless other fruiting stems to provide food and cover for birds during the winter. Frequent frosts and the occasional snow on those stems and branches provide added interest to the winter landscape. And remember that seed pods of trumpet vines provide food for goldfinches in late December.

The rule of “fall is for pruning” is perhaps the most abused rule of all. Except for hedges and selected fruit-bearing vines, shrubs and trees, there is really no



PHOTO BY KEN MOORE

Brilliant red stems of pokeberry accent the landscape from summer through fall.

need for pruning. Other than occasional cutting of dead branches, if there seems a need for pruning then most likely the plants are situated in spaces inappropriate for their natural growth habit. Sometimes I sense that pruning is a physical activity displayed by a non-gardener who needs to be viewed as a gardener. By all means, hold off your impulsive pruning of evergreens at least until the holiday season so that you can benefit, and save some expense, by enjoying those evergreen branches indoors. Above all, please, please place a note on your refrigerator door that you will not participate in the downright criminal late-winter ritual of shearing back crape myrtles. Crape myrtles, even the so-called dwarf varieties, are trees, and by nature should have rights to grow as designed, to become beautiful specimens rather than vegetative amputees, an embarrassment to American horticultural practice.

SEE **KEN MOORE** PAGE 8

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KEN MOORE
FROM PAGE 3

Another rule-breaking recommendation will terrorize your homeowners association. Begin designing and managing a wildlife-habitat garden right out there in the front yard. I'll wager that you can do it judiciously, so that you are in compliance, until the association meets to formulate complicated new rules to discredit your encouraging nature on your home ground.

Simply make certain that you demonstrate your showmanship with a power mower. Have at least a six-to-10-foot-wide border along the neighbors' edge of your property. Give it some serpentine variations for aesthetic purposes. Leave substantial portions of the interior of your former lawn free to express itself. Mow a few curvy paths through the interior of it. Install bird feeders. Insert a small wading pool-size water feature in the ground with some container aquatic plants and a rock or two for birds to have access to the water. You will be amazed how quickly frogs and other small critters will take up residence.



PHOTO BY KEN MOORE
Rusty-red smooth sumac seed heads provide color and architectural interest through the winter..

Make your own wildlife habitat sign to announce that you are quite intentional with your garden design. When you've been at it for a year or two, you will most likely qualify for an official wildlife habitat display certificate from the National Wildlife Federation. Plant a blueberry or two for the birds and, here and there, as your time allows, create some small

plantings of selected wildflower and grass species, like black-eyed susans, cone-flowers, goldenrods, asters and the like. Let the rest of the lawn grasses flower and seed. Don't add lime and don't fertilize, and wildflowers and native grasses will slowly volunteer into your natural garden. You'll most likely be surprised by what is already there in the lawn that will flower

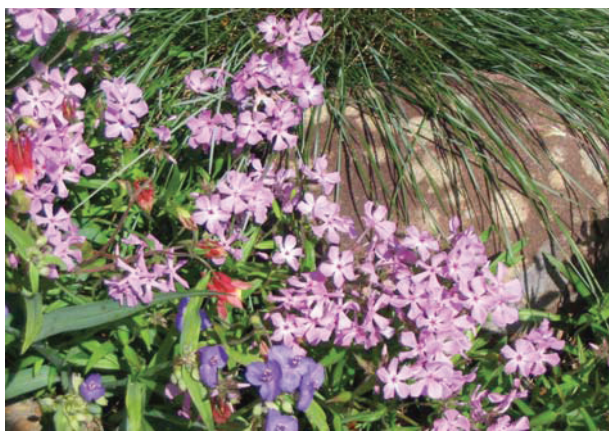
for you when allowed to grow. If you really feel threatened by your neighbors, demonstrate more control and intention by placing, ever so artistically, a split-rail fence or some other containment feature so the neighbors will feel more protected from your bird and butterfly garden.

Your gardening effort will be reduced and you will enjoy the diversity of butterflies and other insect dramas your garden will attract.

However, if watering, reseeding, herbiciding, fertilizing and repetitively mowing and blowing a lawn is your gardening pleasure, this wild gardening is not for you. Remember, gardening should be rewarding and pleasurable. The choice is yours.

My one serious rule for the fall is "plant a deciduous holly," *Ilex decidua*. If you do not already have one, go out to a local garden center and order one if not available, making certain you acquire a male plant to go with the lady. A female deciduous holly when fully fruited is a real joy for several months, from October through March.

Good luck following your own rules for the fall, and remember you should be having fun!



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