September in the Garden

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Thryallis, a large evergreen shrub, blooms almost year-round.

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We’re thankfully nearing the end of the dog days of summer – those long weeks from mid-July until early September that bring the hottest and muggiest weather of our year. An ancient text called this “…an evil time – when seas boiled, wine turned sour, dogs grew mad and all creatures became languid, causing man to have burning fevers, hysterics and phrensies.”

Sometimes the best we can do while in the grip of dog days, is to look around and see what plants still thrive, perhaps making notes of things to plant for next year to gladden the eye during the evil times.

My favorites this year are Coreopsis ‘Limerock Passion’ with clear bright pink flowers, Calibrachoa ‘Calimor Series’ with tiny prostrate purple flowers, Salvia coccinea ‘Skylights Magenta,’ a clear deep color with the tubular part of the flower darker than the open petals, and Thryallis glauca, with bright yellow blooms that keep going for months with little care. Zinnia ‘Orange Profusion’ blooms non-stop with no signs of mildew and zinnia ‘Cut and Come Again’ makes a bright spot in the morning sun under a pine tree. Orange Tecoma stans looks great planted with Canna ‘Bengal Tiger.’

A favorite container planting, created by gardeners at Maclay Gardens, includes a deep ‘Imperial Blue’ Plumbago that creates a cooling spot to rest the eyes, ‘Ruby Glow’ Pentas, and sweet potato vine ‘Marguerite’ with a spiky Dracaena in the center. Of course, gardening professionals work outdoors year round, regardless of the weather, so they can attest to the phrensies that sometimes occur during dog days!
As you wander in your garden to look, carry pruners and deadhead spent flowers, an easy chore that will assure your flowers continue blooming into fall. Later you’ll want to leave spent flowers of such things as purple coneflower, to develop seedheads to feed the birds, and to re-seed.

More ambitious pruning can be done to evergreen shrubs, before mid month, so that new growth will have time to harden before the first frost date. Long shoots can be pruned from azaleas to neaten the plants, but be very selective, as flower buds for next spring’s bloom have already formed, so overall pruning would remove all of next year’s flowers.

Look for plant pests that are active this time of year; chinch bugs on St. Augustinegrass lawns will cause yellow or brown spots in otherwise healthy grass. Spray only the affected areas, concentrating on the margins of the spots. Azalea caterpillars are easy to spot by looking for bare branches, often with a few small leaves at the very tip. They are easily controlled if found early, by pruning off the branch along with the mass of tiny caterpillars. As they grow larger and disperse over the entire bush, a spray application will be required for control.

Vegetable gardeners look forward to planting fall crops of greens, broccoli, cauliflower and cabbages, late in the month. A planting of warm-season vegetables can still be made before mid-month, choosing varieties that bear quickly in order to harvest before the average first frost date of November 21st.

Some summer annual flowers, such as zinnias, can be planted by mid-month, to give a quick burst of color that will carry into fall. Marigolds and chrysanthemums typify the colors of fall, and can be planted this month. Korean mums are old-timey favorites, in colors of pink and salmon. Fall blooming perennials can be planted, including Mexican sage, asters, joe-pye weed, lion’s ear and cigar plant, to begin flowering soon.

Keen observance now aids planning for fall planting. Next month will bring the season for planting of trees, shrubs, cool-season annuals and spring-flowering bulbs, enjoying cool crisp days as we return to active duty in the garden. Even the dogs will be happy to see the end of dog days!

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