October in the Tallahassee Garden

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Photo by David W. Marshall, Leon County Extension UF-IFAS: Now is the best time of year to plant petunias.

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Right Plant, Right Place, Right Time
October brings the promise of cooler weather. It is a time to enjoy working in the garden after struggling through a brutally hot summer to keep up with garden chores. This is an excellent time to plant cool season annuals, seeds of spring flowers, bulbs, perennials, shrubs, and trees. Provided they receive sufficient moisture, plants develop extensive roots during the fall and winter and are better able to support spring growth.

Here are some pointers for making plant selections:

- Be aware of invasive plants, and avoid them.
- Choose low maintenance plants which require less water, fertilizer, and pruning.
- Group plants according to their water and maintenance needs.
- Consider the size the plant will be when it is mature.
- Position trees to aid in warming and cooling your home.

Among invasive plants to avoid are nandina, coral ardesia, camphor trees, wild taro, Chinese privet, mimosa, air potato, and Japanese honeysuckle. Invasive plants are not only very difficult to eradicate once they have been established; but they also spread into surrounding woods and other natural areas.

This is a good time to get rid of “problem plants” and try something new. Instead of continuing to use insecticides on pest-prone plants, consider replacing them with more tolerant varieties.

As the weather cools later in the month, you can plant pansies, violas, petunias, snapdragons, dianthus, nemesia, diascia, and calendulas for fall, winter, and early spring color. Perennials to plant now include purple coneflower, agastache, rudbeckia, yarrow, and numerous types of salvia. All of these require a good bit of sun.
Divide and transplant spring-blooming bulbs now. Bulbs that can be planted as we move into cooler weather are daffodils, Dutch iris, anemone, and ranunculus.

For spring flowers, sow seeds of poppies, bachelor buttons, sweet peas, and larkspur later this month. Choose a sunny location. Keep the seedbed moist until the seeds germinate and the seedlings establish an extensive enough root system to water less frequently.

Plant camellias, azaleas, crape myrtles and other woody ornamentals now. If you’re looking for trees for your yard, consider native species like Shumard oak, southern magnolia, spruce pine, and bald cypress.

Cool season vegetables to plant this month include beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, collards and onions. October is also the time to plant strawberries for spring fruit. Herbs that may be planted now include parsley, rosemary, sage, thyme, dill and cilantro.

**Fertilizer**
You can apply fertilizer to your lawn this month if you didn’t fertilize in August or September. Apply a 5-0-20 product before mid-October. Winter annuals, herbs, and vegetables will benefit from a light monthly application of fertilizer such as 15-0-15. If winter weeds were a problem in your yard last year, you can apply a pre-emergent herbicide to your lawn later this month. Just be sure to follow label directions carefully.

**Mulch**
When leaves and pine needles begin to fall, collect them for use as mulch. Use pine needles as they are. But it’s best to mow over piles of leaves to chop them into finer particles. Use 2”-3” of mulch and don’t pile it against the stem of the plant because it will encourage rot. Both pine needles and leaves are nutrient-rich and, best of all, they’re free.

**Wildlife**
Hummingbirds will be leaving the area later this month. When you’re sure that they’re gone, take down your feeders and wash thoroughly in hot soapy water before storing them for the winter. Continue to fill bird feeders and baths as many bird species over winter here, and many others “stop by” on their way south.

**Water**
Be sure to water all newly planted plants and trees several times a week at first. When cooler weather sets in, the watering may be tapered off to twice a week. It’s always best to water early in the day to reduce evaporation. But this is less important as the weather turns cooler.

Get out there and enjoy your garden!

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