August in the Tallahassee Garden

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Narrow-leaf zinnia is one of several heat-tolerant flowers that can be planted now.

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Thursday, August 7, 2008
Tallahassee Democrat

Resist the urge to put in new plants in the baking heat of August. Instead concentrate on maintaining the plants you have and preparing them for a spectacular fall blooming season. In two months the garden will be ravishing if you can manage a few small chores now. Work in the early morning hours to avoid the heat. For those gardeners who don’t do mornings try working in the cool of the evenings.

Take a critical look at your garden and see what needs trimming and neatening. Remove spent blooms from shrubs such as hydrangea, crepe myrtle and butterfly bush. Trim floppy, overgrown annuals to freshen them up. Cut back leggy perennials, like salvias and pentas, by one-third. For those empty, sunny spots that cry out for plants, try heat-tolerant vincas, zinnias, cosmos, melampodium and portulaca. Add coleus and caladiums to brighten up shady spots. Just remember to give plants extra water until they are established.

Newly planted trees and shrubs will need to be fertilized. If you are satisfied with the look and size of a tree or shrub, there is no need to fertilize it. Rejuvenate annuals and perennials by an application of fish emulsion. Or use a fertilizer such as 15-0-15 with slow-release nitrogen. This will ensure lots of blooms in the fall.

Check to be sure there is plenty of mulch in your beds and around trees and shrubs. Cover all bare spots. Organic mulches, such as pine straw, leaves, and tree bark deteriorate over time and will need to be replenished. This deterioration is what enriches your soil which in turn feeds your plants. Pine straw deteriorates at a slower rate than other mulches and tends to stay in place better on slopes and other areas where mulch can be washed away by heavy rainfall.
Weed and remove debris from the vegetable garden. Growing vegetables depletes the soil of nutrients, so now is the time to add compost, leaf mould and fertilizer. Okra, southern peas, and lima beans will take the heat and can be planted now. From the middle to the end of the month try planting seeds of broccoli, cauliflower, collards, and turnips. Onions, beans and squash will fare better toward the end of the month. Ignore the sweat pouring off your brow and think instead of all the delicious, fresh vegetables you are going to be eating in a couple of months.

If your grass needs a boost, try a fertilizer with thirty to fifty percent slow-release nitrogen and no phosphorus. Apply at a rate of one pound of nitrogen per thousand square feet. This is equivalent to six pounds of 15-0-15 fertilizer. Be sure to water the fertilizer in lightly. If you wait on rain and we get a downpour, the fertilizer may be swept away by the rain and contribute to the pollution of our streams and lakes. Forego fertilizing altogether if you are happy with the way your lawn looks. After all, fertilizer and water lead to more lawn mowing. Also too much fertilizer and too much water can lead to a too-lush lawn which is more attractive to certain pests. If you have an automatic irrigation system, you may want to turn it off this month and let the rain do most of the watering.

When October arrives you will be glad you made yourself get out in the heat and humidity of a hot August day to prepare the garden for fall.

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