OCTOBER IN THE TALLAHASSEE GARDEN

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Plant petunias in late October so that they will flower well in the spring.

Pam Sawyer is an employee of Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park and a Master Gardener volunteer with University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County, http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/

October 2, 2008
Tallahassee Democrat

The best and busiest month of the year for gardening is October! The heat and humidity have abated and now is the perfect time to plant trees, shrubs, perennials and annuals. It’s also a great time for transplanting those shrubs you want to move and for dividing crowded perennials.

Plants concentrate on root growth in the cooler months of the year. This makes the fall an ideal time for putting in new perennial beds, adding trees and shrubs, moving existing plants and dividing overcrowded ones. The roots will grow all winter and in spring you will have plants which are better able to branch, bloom and withstand heat and humidity. Also, since it is cooler in the fall your plants won’t need as much water. However, October can be a dry month, so don’t forget to water if we don’t get rain. The larger the plant the more water it needs and the longer it takes to get established. If you plant a large tree you may need to provide supplemental water for a year or more.

October can be quite hot. For this reason it is safer to plant winter annuals a little later in the month. Pansies, petunias, dianthus, snapdragons, stock, alyssum, delphiniums, foxgloves, diascia and nemesia prefer cool weather and if they don’t get it, you will spend a lot of time watering them. Winter annuals easily grown from seed include larkspur, bachelor buttons, poppies, calendula, nigella and sweet peas. For health and vigor these annuals need to be rotated just as you would vegetables. Flowers in the same family can be grown in the same location every fourth year.

Spring blooming bulbs can be planted now. These include narcissus, iris, lilies, achimenes, and amaryllis. Tulips and hyacinths need six to eight weeks of refrigeration before planting in late December or early January. For something new, try Anemone coronaria or poppy anemones in a sunny spot. Just like tulips and hyacinths, they are treated as annuals in our climate. They look great planted amongst pansies and petunias and some of them may return.
Most plants don’t need fertilizer in winter, but annuals, vegetables and some bulbs are exceptions. When choosing a fertilizer pick one with thirty- to fifty-percent slow-release or water-insoluble nitrogen. The numbers on the bag don’t have to be big for the fertilizer to work.

To get ahead of the winter weeds that will be springing up in your grass you can apply a pre-emergent herbicide this month. You do not want a weed and feed type product as the grass does not need to be fed this late in the season. Pick a product containing atrazine or isoxaben. Or try corn gluten meal, a nontoxic by-product of corn processing which prevents new seedlings from growing roots and kills them within a few days. Pre-emergent herbicides should only be applied to established lawns. Keep them out of the root zone of trees and shrubs.

In your vegetable garden you can plant lots of greens: Swiss chard, lettuce, spinach, collards, kale, mustard greens and turnips. Add some beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, onions, radishes, and strawberries to round things out. For something different try growing fava beans, leeks and kohlrabi. For annual herbs, plant parsley and cilantro. Sage, thyme, oregano and rosemary are perennial herbs to plant now. Many Floridians consider the winter vegetable garden to be far more rewarding, and less work, than its spring sister. So get out those tools and gloves and hats and get to work, or play, as the case may be!