

Handling Gardens Now In That Awkward Stage

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It is August in the garden, and the energy of spring has evaporated like the dew - for the garden and the gardener.

What looked so fresh and promising in May looks scraggly and wilted now, and the punishing heat and drought of late summer in the Mid-Atlantic saps the will to do anything about it.

If I wait a little longer, the gardener tells herself, it will be time for mums and this awkward phase in the garden cycle will be forgotten.

In spring, we haunt the garden centers and purchase what is blooming at the moment, doubling down our investment in early-season color. No so now. It's too hot. Or we are on vacation. In August, the garden is a neglected child.

In an attempt to reignite the enthusiasm for gardening, here are some modest suggestions for sprucing up the garden before it is time to simply replace everything with field mums.

Addition by subtraction is Kurt Bluemel's recommendation. "One of the things that gardeners forget to do is deadhead," said the owner of Bluemel Inc. of Baldwin. "A lot of perennials will come back to life. Cut back to the next leaf node, and you will get late-summer bloom."

This advice applies to salvias, daisies, asters. "Just about all the perennials," he said.

"If it is brown, cut it down," said tough-talking Nancy Moitrier of Designs for Greener Gardens in Annapolis. She is also a believer in fish emulsion as a fertilizer for tired plants. Spray the foliage, she advises, and "it will give your plants a kick that you will notice in just a few days."

Now is a good time to replace the tired herbs in the pots outside your kitchen door, or the ones that have been chewed to bits by insects in the garden.

Flat-leaf parsley, cilantro and basil may be played out by now. Oregano and sage may be sunburned. Even lavender and rosemary may be looking poorly. Plant some new young plants and you will extend your fresh herb season, even if you have to bring the basil and cilantro indoors when the weather gets cool.

Be tough, and tear out the annuals that have had their day, and redo the containers that look overgrown or tired. Petunias are getting rangy, zinnias are browning. Replace them with something fresh that can carry you into fall.

"Plant petunias again if you want," says Cindy Fielder of Valley View Farms, which is still carrying a variety of petunia seedlings. "Or go all the way over to fall."

Some familiar annuals are now available in fall colors, particularly calibrachoa, or million bells, in terra cotta, deep purple, reddish orange and burnt yellow, and snapdragons in yellow and orange. They will like the cooler weather.

Accent these in containers with small ornamental grasses, such as the rust-colored "Toffee Twist" sedge grass or New Zealand's bright green "Frosted Curls," which has a wonderful texture to go with its name.

Coleus has found new respectability after years out of style, and it comes in a huge range of colors perfect for the fall, from lime green to deep red. "You have to be prepared to lose it at the first frost," warned Fielder.

Ornamental peppers are ideal for fall planters, with their red, purple, orange or yellow fruit. Not particularly tasty, but pretty to look at.

Take a fresh look at the new varieties of a couple of old friends: sedum and heuchera. Sedum comes in all sizes - from ground cover to a foot tall - and with blooms in vibrant new colors.

And coral bells may be done with their tiny, blooming spikes, but the leaf color of the new varieties runs from lime green to peach pink and from deep purple to dusty gray.

"I love them in a planter," said Fielder. "And they've made it through four winters."

And after having been promised in the spring, the two new varieties of echinacea, "Tomato Soup" and "Mac n' Cheese," have finally arrived at some garden centers. And they are a spectacular red and yellow.

Don't forget about Russian sage, lorioppe, lobelia, anemone, hibiscus and asters. These are fixtures that give the garden color and texture and even drama in the late summer and fall.

And they aren't mums.