

time to

Put Away Our TOYS and Clean Up Our ROOMS

by Maxine Paetro

Now, as in every October past, the blazing autumn leaves signal that it's time to clean up the garden rooms.

There is a threefold objective to this end-of-season work: To mulch vegetation that if left in the garden over winter would harbor disease and varmints, to reveal the clean lines of the garden for a sparkling winter view, and to prepare the grounds for a tidy spring garden display.

The jobs are divided into yard and garden chores.

Yard first.

Top gardener, Heather Thomson and I, have been waiting for the tree service to come -- and the day is here. Gnarly old maples, locusts, native crabapples, wild cherries and box elders, have, over time, increased so much in height and width, I almost need a miner's lamp to see my way along the pathways in the shade gardens

Using a cherry picker and ropes, branches are selectively pruned, and trees that are crowded, wounded, dying or dead are taken down. The tree man puts branches through the chipper and the nice clean pile of chips that come out of the chute will be used next year as path mulch in the vegetable and woodland gardens and on the central walk under the apple tunnel.

As the chainsaws are packed away, sunbeams break through the haze and I can see how the viburnums and daylilies will flourish next year.

Hose are coiled and stowed in the tool shed. The tractor cuts hay in the field along the north side of the long border and irrigation lines are drained so that they don't freeze and break over winter. Outdoor furniture is stored in the empty studio and the studio itself is sealed against the annual field mouse invasion.

We take a breath.

And now, it's time to cut back the gardens.

Heather clears the vegetable garden first. Tomatoes and cucumbers are uprooted and thrown into the mulch pile, while annual cosmos and vervain flower heads are scattered so that they will seed the beds for next summer's color.

Perennial herbs; comfrey, mints, monarda and marshmallows are cut to the ground, but Echinacea flower heads and mullein stalks are left for the finches to snack on.

Clay pots are emptied and turned over, and the hand-pulled terra cotta labels that marked the vegetable beds are bundled with twine and put away in the garden shed, which is now closed for the winter.



Photos by Jennifer May

In the flower beds and borders, seeds and berries that will feed the wildlife and look good in winter, are left on the stalks and branches. Perennials that have finished blooming are cut to a few inches of bare stems and the remains of a densely floral summer are raked onto a tarp and dragged to the compost pile.

We stop to admire the robust rose hips in the long border and the under-planting of a chartreuse-leaved veronica that looks like molten gold and contrasts brilliantly with the wines and plums of the asters.

Japanese anemones still bloom in the courtyard, pale pink against the white bottle-brush blooms of *sanguisorba obtusa*, a backdrop for the purple spikes of monkshood that are the courtyard's last stand.

In the cottage garden, the hydrangeas' cone-shaped panicles have turned from white to russet -- time to bring bunches inside for dried bouquets. This is also the last moment to fertilize the apple tunnel and plant the remaining bags of spring-blooming bulbs.

The brick paths are weeded for the last time this year and leaves are blown from the beds, with more leaf blowing to come by month's end. Phlox that has been blooming exuberantly for two solid months is braced for a dramatic haircut. When that is done, the boxwood hedges that line the walks and beds will impose order once more.

In fact, as the plants are cut back, the satisfying structure of the garden rooms presents itself, renewed.

In the hills surrounding this garden spot, flaming trees rise up like fans in the bleachers as the home-town team scores.

What a glorious send-off to the 2009 garden season.

I cannot tell a lie.

I so look forward to snow.



Maxine Paetro co-writes with author, James Patterson. Their two recent collaborations, "8th Confession" and "Swimsuit" are both NY Times #1 best-sellers. See more of her Amenia garden, Broccoli Hall, at BroccoliHall.com.

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