Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

In My Garden - July 2009

by Betty Coffelt, UC Master Gardener

There's no doubt about it, summer is definitely here! If your garden has inadequate or broken irrigation systems, then dry spots in the lawn or dying plants in the garden are starting to show. Try to switch some areas of your yard from sprinklers to hoses that seep water or to drip tubing. The main gardening goal this month is to provide adequate water to plants without wasting water in the landscape.

There is however several other chores to keep us occupied in the summer heat. Most have to do with pruning and shaping our spring flowering shrubs and plants such as hydrangeas, lilacs, star jasmine, pineapple guava (feijoa), and several types of daisy bushes. I plan to have my lace cap hydrangea pruned back by the first week in July. It is important to get these pruning chores done on time to maximize flower production and plant shape for the new growth flush.

Quite often blooming shrubs give us clues as to when to prune: flowers begin to fade, and if you look from the top and glance down the stem, you will see new growth appearing. If you need to keep the bush/shrub smaller, then cut below the new growth. If you want to keep the shrub large, then cut back to just above the new growth.

Hydrangeas are deciduous shrubs. If your garden has hydrangeas, then you need to know that there are two distinct types of hydrangeas which are pruned very differently. One type produces bloom buds on "old wood" and the other type produces bloom buds on "new wood." The type most commonly found in the garden is the one that produces buds on "old wood". This includes the old garden hydrangeas such as Mophead, Big Leaf, and Lacecap types (Hydrangea macrophylla) and the OakLeaf hydrangea (H. quercifolia).

Prune these hydrangeas only after bloom in the summer before mid July. Old wood hydrangeas start developing their bloom buds for next year in August. Many people make the mistake of pruning their old wood bloomers in the fall, and then regret it because the plant produces no flowers in spring.

Calla lilies were gorgeous this year. Now is the time to cut the flower stems back to a new leaf. Remove old dying leaves to keep the plant looking nice.

Alstroemerias are also in the lily family and are perennials that grow from tuberous roots. They produce clusters of azalea-like flowers in bright colors with contrasting blotches and flecks on top of leafy stems. I have them scattered in different spots around the house and the early ones growing in full sun are ready to be cleaned up. Dead stems and seed heads are easy to remove just by pulling them out of the ground. Cleaning up after the first big bloom can look like bare ground, but keep this area watered and new alstromeria shoots will emerge. The next bloom will not be as abundant as the first, but you will get flowers.

Also most gladiolas are done (except for some corms I planted late for an extended bloom). I only remove the spent flower stems down to the first leaf on the plant. By keeping the green leaves and allowing them to turn yellow before removing them, feeds the corm for next year's flowers. This applies to most bulbs and corms. People are often too anxious to clean up and remove all of the green leaves and stems after the blooms have faded.

A distinctive annual that I grow for cut flowers in my garden is the Bells of Ireland (Moluccella laevis). I just learned that this plant is not from Ireland, but in fact is native to the Mideast. Each year the seed develops into a plant that is almost 3 feet tall and a foot wide. Stems bear whorls of apple green "bells" with teeny white flower petals in the center. The blooms begin to fade as temperatures increase, turning totally white. I usually allow a few to "go to seed" for next year.

Out in the vegetable garden, growth is in full swing. I am still picking some berries each day and freezing them. When picking cucumbers I notice that aphids are multiplying at a faster pace than the lady bugs, so each time I pick I remove a few of the aphid covered lower leaves. This helps keep the aphid population in check. I only spray with water to dislodge them from leaves and use no insecticide.

I am so excited as my first tomatoes of the season will be ready for our Fourth of July picnic. Enjoy yours!

July 2, 2009