

Fall- the Best Time for Planting?

Those of you who grew up in the East or in areas where “April showers bring May flowers” probably think this statement is crazy. But for areas of the country that have mild winters and hot summers fall really is the best time to plant, transplant, and divide. Here’s why:

It’s cooler for newly installed plants so they are less stressed.

With cooler temperatures in the fall dividing plants like daylilies is easier on plants and the gardener. Plants reestablish faster.

There’s free water during monsoon season (July to mid-September) so it’s easier (and cheaper) to get new plants established. Also, because it’s cooler the new or transplanted plants need less water – note that’s **less** water not NO water - you still need to water them. Using mulch (organic top of soil covering) conserves even more moisture in the soil and helps moderate soil temperature for an even longer period of root growth.

Insect and disease pressure is less. As the heat of summer drops and as leaves begin to fall there are fewer insects to chew new leaves or suck the chlorophyll from them. Chances of root rots are less because there’s less need to water heavily and it’s cooler. Fungi like warm and moist conditions.

The soil is still warm and temperatures are moderate so there’s less transplant shock. In the spring new plants must adapt to cold soil, dry winds, early frosts, followed in mid-May by withering heat and sometimes hail in early June. The time between last frost and summer heat is short here – making it tougher for new plants to survive and requiring more of your attention.

In the fall nutrients generated by leaves can be redirected from growing new leaves to extending roots. 80% of root growth occurs in late summer and fall. Root growth continues during late fall and winter until the ground is frozen.

Plants take off the following spring because of better root growth and increased top growth. They also may flower better the first season. Fall planted plants are also more drought tolerant and have less sun scorch as they’ve had more time to grow and become established than spring planted plants. Gallon sized or larger plants hold up to early frosts better.

While most plants prefer fall planting some of the more tender ones or those that prefer heat and hate cold should be planted in the spring. These are primarily USDA zone 8 plants, marginal for us unless you find a good (hot) microclimate or planting site for them.

If you’re a vegetable grower fall (beginning in August) is the best time to plant seeds or starts for cool season crops like broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, lettuce, chard, spinach, kale, onions, radishes, and carrots. Row covers can be used to protect the leafy ones from frost.

Fall is a great time to plant pansies, violas, chrysanthemums and spring blooming bulbs. Bulbs need the chill time before spring.

August is a good time to establish a warm-season grass lawn; September a good time for a cool season lawn. And both types of turf can be fertilized in September/October to encourage a good start in the spring.

When is too late to plant in the fall – about 2-4 weeks before first frost. One downside of fall planting is the selection of plants is less and some plants may be root-bound in their pots. On the other hand for deciduous trees and shrubs with fall color, you get to see the color before planting and nurseries put plants on sale in the fall so you may get more plants for your money.