

September's Garden Song

Written by Alice Massey

Tuesday, 24 September 2013 11:57



It's the same old song; gardening is always cyclical. With slight variances for weather, what happened or bloomed last September is likely to be happening again. I checked back to see what I had written about this time last year. The article was called "The Unwanted Guests" and it was about deer.

Having just returned home after five weeks in the North Carolina mountains, I find once again the deer have been pillaging the neighborhood. Although I applied a deer repellent heavily before I left, and the bottle said it was good for an extended period, the abundant rainfall while I was gone surely washed away any trace of the foul smelling potion. Thus, they are baaacck and they are hungry! Once again, dressed in my oldest clothes, I have been out spraying more foul smelling repellent.

Deer tear savagely at plants. I have been pruning ragged torn stems back to healthy nodes; a node is that place where the leaves and new branches emerge. Always choose an outward facing node; this encourages branches to grow in that direction. (Inward growing branches are likely to crisscross each other, causing too much growth in too small an area, limiting the light and air that can get to the center of the plant. This weakens the plant and encourages disease.)

We often read about native plants being immune to deer damage. Sometimes the plant itself is unpalatable but the fruit may be very attractive to a hungry animal. One such plant (that I truly do encourage everyone to grow) is the Beautyberry or French Mulberry, *Callicarpa americana*. This southeastern native that can grow to 8 feet has arching stems with tiny hairs and rough leaves, both of which generally discourage hungry critters. This deciduous shrub blooms in early summer and the tiny flowers are a sweet surprise – if you see them. They are hidden along the stem under the leaves and rarely even noticed. The fruit that follows however is a knockout. Hybrids are available that produce berries in different colors. I have seen them in white, pink and lavender; in my opinion however, they can't hold a candle to the wild variety.

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Deep royal purple berries are heavily clustered along the stems. They are such a rich color and quite striking in the garden. It is the fruits that the deer delight in. I recently saw three does picking stem after stem clean of just the berries. The upside is that the deer will later process these berries through their digestive system and "plant" them for us elsewhere in the garden. You can't beat the price of these shrubs; like other natives, thanks to the deer and birds, they tend to just show up in the garden, occasionally needing to be transplanted to a more appropriate location. You may already have this gem in your garden, if not ask around; gardeners love to share their bounty.

Fall To Do's

Some timely reminders include a big what NOT to do now. No matter what the national merchandisers tell you, do not fertilize your southern turf grass now. The grasses that most of us grow here, St. Augustine and Centipede, need to go dormant, with all their strength returning to their roots so they have the energy to grow strong next year. Applying heavy nitrogen fertilizer now will actually weaken your turf in the long run and encourage weeds. Also discouraged is the practice of overseeding lawns with winter rye grass. This was common in the past but we know now that the rye grass shades the emerging turf grass next spring, hampering its growth. Leaving well enough alone is easier, cheaper and the best for your lawn; what more could we ask for?

Save the Dates

The Charleston Horticultural Society is holding their Fall Garden Tour October 13th, on Daniel Island. This annual walking/driving tour is a treat for me every year. It is always enlightening to see the gardens and how different plants are used in different situations. www.chashortsoc.org for information.

The Historic Beaufort Fall Festival Home and Garden tours will be held October 25th, 26th and 27th. A number of historic properties will be open, many of which feature designs and plants original to the homes. For more information go to: www.historicbeaufort.org

The Midlands Master Gardeners will hold their Fall Symposium on October 17th in Columbia. Featured speakers include Doug Tallemey, Allan Armitage and Sharon Thompson. A number of plant vendors will offer the newest horticultural selections. www.SCMMGA.org for information.

Enjoy this beautiful fall weather, the love bugs are gone and the temperature is moderate. Get out and dig and do your best to keep the deer from the daisies.

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