



# October Tips

## PERENNIALS, ANNUALS AND BULBS

*by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture*

- One of the most popular of the early spring flowers is the perennial Polyanthus Primrose (*Primula x polyantha*). Plant some this fall, and you will have a rainbow of colors when the weather breaks. Other plants that can be planted early include Calendula, Iceland poppy, pansy, stock and sweet pea.
- Small imperfections, such as nicks and loose skin, should not affect the quality of most bulbs. Store bulbs in a cool area (below 65°F) if unable to plant immediately.
- According to Ohio State researchers, cold water can destroy the ability of root cells to take in water and nutrients. Water below 50°F was found to reduce leaf size, cause leaf drop, and eventually contribute to the death of potted plants. Those requiring frequent watering, such as spathiphyllum and ficus, are especially prone to damage and should not be watered with water below 65°F. Other tests show that warmer water (about 90°F) actually stimulates growth.
- To achieve a more-relaxed, "natural" look, plant scattered clusters of early flowering bulbs, such as crocus, throughout your lawn. But, don't mow the area until the foliage dies the next summer.
- Ferns can be planted or transplanted in fall.
- Calathea, a popular foliage plant, flourishes in low light and over a wide temperature range indoors. It may be called 'the second-chance plant' because if you forget to care for it for a few weeks, just water well, trim off the damaged areas, and watch for new shoots to emerge in about a month.
- Be sure to clean up from around your perennial flowers, such as rose and peony. If left on the ground, leaves and stems can harbor diseases and provide convenient places for pests to spend the winter.
- Hyacinths have oil in the bulbs that may make some people itch. Wear gloves when handling these bulbs or wash your hands with cool water and soap immediately after planting.
- It's not unusual for some spring-flowering bulbs to send up a few leaves in the late fall or early winter. The bulbs will remain safe over the winter and will still produce flowers next spring.
- Move and divide crowded perennials. Arrange for swaps with friends and neighbors.
- A variegated variety of *Vinca minor* with its evergreen foliage will provide colorful greenery in window boxes during the winter.

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- Cut down stems and foliage of herbaceous perennials when the leaves begin to brown.
- Bring in cannas, dahlias, and gladioli, if not hardy in your area, after the tops are browned by frost. Allow to dry, clean off soil, and store in peat moss or vermiculite in a cool location free from frost.
- If you have a sunny area to naturalize with small, flowering annuals, sow seeds of sweet alyssum or Johnny jump-ups. They will come up this fall or early spring and bloom extra early next spring. Both are very hardy and self seed readily to maintain the natural area.
- Add mulch to your perennial border. A 1-inch layer of weed-free straw or chopped leaves will help conserve soil moisture, protect the root system, and reduce plant loss by soil heaving during the winter.
- Allow a few of the seeds of your favorite delphinium and hollyhock to ripen on their stalks. When mature, plant the seeds at once in a garden bed where they will grow into husky little plants that survive the winter well.
- A lily bulb is never dormant; it must be planted as soon as it is received. Have beds prepared ahead of time.
- As you clean out the flower beds, mark the spots where late starting perennials will come up next spring to avoid damaging them while working in the beds.

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*Monthly Tips have been prepared since 1986 by various staff of the Office of Consumer Horticulture including Ellen Bennett, Michelle Buckstrup, Susan Day, Susan DeBolt, Sharon Dendy, Kate Dobbs, Sheri Dom, David Gravell, Virginia Nathan, Jenny Shuster, Ellen Silva, and Ruth Sorenson. Resource material for the development of this information includes the Virginia Master Gardener Handbook; Extension Publications and newsletters from VCE, numerous other states, and the USDA; and an extensive library of over 900 books, magazines and journals. Project funded by The Virginia Gardener Newsletter subscription fees. Diane Relf, Project Director and Content Specialist.*

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