



THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence



Raspberries © Wikimedia Commons/Juhanson



Courgette flower © Wikimedia Commons/net_efekt

It's July again and hopefully all your hard work over the past weeks and months has paid off. The vegetable garden should be producing nicely so you are able to have lovely fresh veg at the drop of a hat and all the extras are filling the freezer nicely; and isn't it nice to have strawberries

and raspberries on tap? Don't

forget the edible flowers for salads - there should be plenty of courgette and runner bean flowers.

So now it's a case of keeping everything tidy and under control. Sow autumn vegetables in vacant spaces left as you crop beetroot, carrots, lettuce, chard etc and keep hoeing and weeding between rows, (weeds not only look unsightly but they are taking nutrients and moisture from the soil that should be going into your veggies). Keep your eyes open for pests and diseases and deal with accordingly. This time of the year it's as well to spray with Bordeaux Mixture to prevent blight.

In the flower garden, keep weeding and dead-heading. Lupins and Delphiniums will give a second display if you cut them hard back, almost to ground level, after flowering. Bearded Irises can be divided now so that they can make new roots and flower buds for next year before the cold weather arrives. Wisterias will need pruning - cut the whippy side-shoots back to about 5 leaves from the main stem. They are also producing seed pods now, just like peas (they are actually one of the pea family). Unlike peas, however, these seeds are poisonous, so keep out of the reach of children.

Talking of seeds, now is the time to think about making new plants from old - collecting seeds, taking cuttings, layering. Exciting! So when you walk around your garden have a couple of paper bags for seeds and polythene bags for cuttings in your pocket alongside secateurs and marker pen.

Collect seeds on a dry, wind-free day. Choose a healthy, pest and disease-free plant with a seed pod which looks about ready to split. Cut off the seed head and invert into a paper bag. Close bag and label then leave in a dry place for the pod to finish ripening. Check regularly. The pods will open and seeds will be safely cached in the bottom of the bag. Seal the seeds in a small envelope labelled with name and date and keep in a dry place until you need them.

Take stem cuttings from shrubs such as Ribes, Potentilla, Forsythia, Mallow etc. At this time of the year they are softwood cuttings, so called because they are new, non-flowering shoots. Choose shoots 2" - 4" long and make a straight cut beneath a pair of leaves. Remove the lower leaves because these will rot in the soil if left on; keep only a couple of pairs of leaves at the top. Dip the cut end in hormone rooting powder or gel. Insert several cuttings around the edge of a pot filled with a mix of compost and grit. Label and water well then keep in a propagator until rooted. If you don't have a propagator you can make a mini-greenhouse by putting 2 or 3 lollysticks in the pot then covering with a clear plastic bag and holding this in place with an elastic band round the pot. When the plants are about 6" tall pinch out the growing tip to encourage bushy growth.

Heel cuttings are similar to softwood cuttings but can be taken at any time of the year from softwood or hardwood, and are particularly suitable for Ceanothus, Lavandula and Rosemary. Just find a healthy-looking side-shoot, about 4" long, and pull it down and away from the main stem. You should finish up with a shoot with a 'heel' of the main stem at its base. Dip this in hormone rooting powder or gel, make a hole in the compost with a pencil and place the cutting in the soil with the 'heel' at the bottom. About 1" of cutting should be below soil. Firm soil around the cutting and deal with as softwood cuttings above.

Hardwood cuttings are taken during the winter when the plant is dormant.

'Layering' is another alternative. This takes longer and is more complicated but the new plant benefits from receiving water and nutrients from the parent plant. At the end of the growing season the layered branch should have rooted and can be separated whilst the plant is dormant. Layering is suitable for shrubs with low-growing, pliable stems eg Rhododendron, Azalea, Magnolia and fruit bushes and climbers. Bend down a low-growing branch and peg a section firmly into the soil, or even a pot or seed-tray sunk into the ground. If necessary put a cane in place to tie the tip of the branch to, to encourage upright growth. Normally, roots will be produced from buried leaf joints within 12-18 months. You can then separate from the parent plant and leave undisturbed until the winter months when it can be transplanted.



Tip layering © Wikimedia Commons

Tip layering and Serpentine layering are alternatives. Tip layering is good for blackberries - just the tip of a new cane is buried, roots form near the tip and the end bud grows into the new shoot. Serpentine layering is good for Wisteria, Clematis etc - make a snake of a long stem, burying and pegging sections to encourage roots to form at several points can separate and pot up

along the same stem. Once rooted you until you are ready to plant outside.

So now you have to decide what plants to propagate and where you will put them. Autumn/winter flowering bulbs will become available soon, so what do you need? Are there any perennials needed for the flower garden? I think you need to sit down in your lovely garden for an hour while you make these important decisions ... any excuse will do ... enjoy!

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