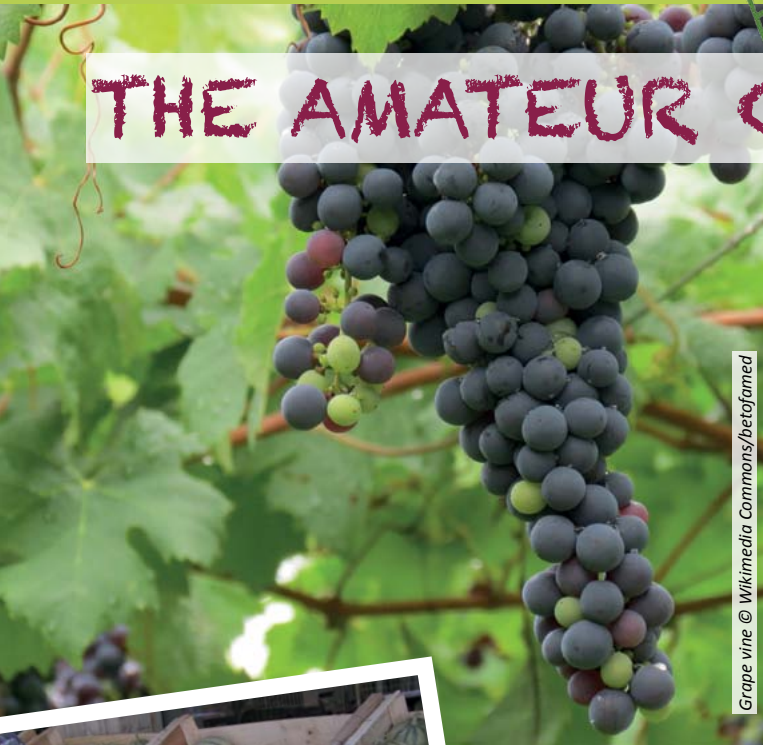




THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence



Grape vine © Wikimedia Commons/betofamed



Charentais melons © Wikimedia Commons/Neal Zirling

Surely not! - Yes, it's September again and Autumn is upon us. Holidays are over, family and other visitors have returned to their own homes and the children have started back to school. So, for us gardeners it's time to knuckle down and catch up in the garden - no excuses!

Let's start in the vegetable garden.

Aubergines, cauliflowers, broad beans, green beans, peas, courgettes, sweetcorn and parsnips are all ready to pick. Share them with friends and neighbours if you have too many, or chop and freeze ready to use during the winter. Potatoes can be lifted and stored too - somewhere cool and dry, 5-8 degrees centigrade is ideal.

As crops are picked you can remove the plants, dig over the soil and fertilize ready for over-wintering and Spring planting. Check the discarded plants for disease before you throw them on to the compost heap - any signs of disease and it is more sensible to burn the plants or take them to the déchetterie rather than inadvertently return the disease to your soil.

Melons will be mature now. Place a piece of wood or a flat stone underneath to protect from the damp soil and turn regularly so the sun can ripen them from all angles. Pumpkins & squash can be dealt with in the same way. Any which haven't ripened by the end of this month should be picked and stored indoors to finish off.

Pears, apples and plums are also ripening. Pick when ready and store carefully in cool, dry conditions. They will usually keep for about 2 months. It goes without saying though, for all the fruit/veg that you store, check regularly because it only needs one tiny, undetected blemish to spoil the whole container.

Grape vines will have been loving the hot, sunny weather we've had because they need lots of sun to ripen the fruit. It helps at this stage to remove leaves close to the fruit bunches to let sun and air in. Thin the grapes out too this month - if bunches are growing too close together the air cannot circulate and they will get mildew and rot. Remove surplus and diseased grapes - use small pointed scissors for easy access.

In the flower garden and shrubbery this is the time to plant new perennials, while the soil is still warm - their new root systems will develop quicker in warm soil; and if your established perennials are outgrowing their space now is the time to lift and divide, for the same reason. Continue to feed dahlias fortnightly with liquid fertiliser to produce good blooms and build up strong tubers for subsequent years.



Planting a new shrub

If you are planting new pot-grown shrubs remember to soak the root-ball in a bucket of water first, until no air bubbles come to the surface. Dig the planting hole and fill this with water too, allowing it all to drain away. Then you can place the plant in the hole, fill with soil, firm gently and water well with a watering can. Plants need to take on as much water as possible to tide them over while they settle in their new situation.

Rake fallen leaves off lawns as soon as possible, especially in wet weather. Aerate, scarify and apply sharp sand to aid drainage. Reseed any worn patches and prepare areas to be turfed or seeded for a new lawn.

My husband has started giving the fish in our pond an extra scoop of food each day. They will always eat as much as you care to give them, but a little extra now will help them through the winter. Also, if you have trees near your pond it's a good idea to cover the pond with netting before the leaves start dropping; it will save time and trouble in the long run.



Leopard's bane © Wikimedia Commons Zeynel Cebeci

I've spoken before about using edible flowers in recipes or to decorate and garnish meals, but medicinal plants are another interesting aspect of gardening. I have only just realised that **Arnica**, (aka Leopard's bane or Wolfbane), is the same Asteracea family as lovely Tournesol sunflowers. Both roots and flowers are used for tincture or gel as a topical external treatment for

bruises, sprains and chilblains. **Chamomile** is a little daisy-like flower which is excellent as a herbal tea to reduce stress and encourage restful sleep. **Sage** (*Salvia officinalis*) is a favourite in the perennial border with so many varieties to choose from, but the leaf can be used to reduce indigestion, flatulence, anxiety, depression, insect bites, skin infections, throat and mouth infections. **Fenugreek** seeds freshen bad breath, help poor digestion, relieve painful menstruation, lower blood cholesterol. **Stinging nettle** leaf tea is good for asthma, hay fever, arthritis, gout, rheumatism, anaemia and PMS symptoms.

I might have sown the seed (sorry for the pun) for some overwinter research if there is anyone out there with a little problem which could be helped by home grown herbal remedies. It's worth a thought ...

Bye for now ...