



AUGUST IN THE GARDEN

By **Russell Jordan**

Last month I made the mistake of starting with “At the time of writing, we’ve had a decent amount of rain”; what a difference a month makes! Heatwaves and practically zero rainfall, since then, have made giving gardening advice somewhat tricky. I am praying that by the time this appears we have had some rain because, otherwise, everything that needs to be done in the garden is largely academic during drought conditions.

If you have a lawn the chances are it is pretty brown by now but, as always, irrigating it would be a criminal waste of water because it will soon turn green as soon as we get a decent amount of rainfall. During drought conditions it will virtually stop growing so mowing can be reduced and, if it is needed at all, the cutting height should be raised to reduce the stress on the sward.

I get the feeling that ‘bedding displays’ and ‘annuals in containers’ are not exactly on trend, when it comes to gardening in 2026, but, especially in smaller spaces, they may be all the gardening you can manage. They will be your priority, when it comes to watering, as they rely totally on you to provide them with all the moisture and nutrients they need to survive. The good thing is that they will be revelling during periods of high temperatures and plentiful sunshine, as long as you can provide them with the necessary hydration and regular feeding. If they do dry out completely it can be very difficult to rewet the compost so, assuming the pot or container isn’t too heavy to lift, it will need to be plunged into a large bucket, or plastic trug, full of water. You’ll know the compost is completely saturated when air bubbles cease to emerge from the submerged container.

If we get a hosepipe ban, or just because it’s a good practice to conserve water, it’s possible to use ‘greywater’ (water recycled from baths, showers, washing up bowls etc.) on garden plants as long as it doesn’t contain excessive amounts of contaminants or detergent. Also, if saved for later use, it shouldn’t be kept for more than about a day just in case it contains bacteria which would multiply over time. For the same reason it’s advisable not to use greywater on any salad or vegetable crops which are eaten raw.

If you must irrigate the garden then your use of water needs to be prioritised with newly planted specimens, especially trees in their first year of establishment, being

top of the list. A good occasional soaking, using multiple watering cans, is always better than constant, but minimal, sprinkling. Just going out and waving a hosepipe around may do more harm than good because water only penetrates a few centimetres into the ground. This encourages plants to produce shallow roots, at the soil surface, rather than encouraging stronger rooting into the deeper soil structure. With roots concentrated at the surface, plants will be even more susceptible to drying out if at any point you are unable to go out and water them—when you go on holiday for example.

Soil which contains a good amount of ‘humus’, the organic matter usually derived from rotted down plant material, can hold onto more water, and is easier to rewet, than an unimproved one. This is why using a humus rich surface mulch, generally added during border maintenance over the winter months, is a good habit to get into. Also, incorporating as much organic matter into the soil, when making new beds and borders, is generally advisable in ‘everyday’ gardens.

This just reminds me of what I wrote following the death of Nigel Dunnett, earlier this year, and I am haunted by the concept of “sensible citizens rather than needy aristocrats”. Looking at his work, along with James Hitchmough, reminds me that the whole ‘right plant, right place’ philosophy, especially if taken to a naturalistic extreme, negates the use of soil improvement and relies instead on creating gardens based on plant populations capable of establishing and thriving in unimproved soil.

Most of us have gardens which were created before this ‘naturalistic’ style became widespread, so soil improvement still has its place when it comes to trying to reduce the need for artificial irrigation at times of drought. The ‘cottage garden’ style has something of the naturalistic philosophy about it. It relies, to a certain extent, on allowing a degree of self-seeding and the use of plant cultivars which are closely related to some of our native plants—herbaceous geraniums being a case in point. Also, I find that roses, a cottage garden stalwart, seem to be surprisingly resilient, when it comes to being droughted, as are a lot of the early flowering shrubs, such as *Deutzia*, *Weigela* and *Philadelphus*. They may wilt a bit but are generally tough enough to survive, without supplementary watering, once they are established.

Usually, I would suggest that herbaceous perennials that have finished flowering, excepting those which have ornamental stems or seedheads, can be chopped down to the ground where they will still have time to produce a fresh flush of foliage, even a second flowering, before the season is over. However, during drought conditions, this is not a good idea as they will already be stressed so cutting them down to nothing could just finish them off. Better to just remove faded flowers, giving them a light tidy up, to keep the border looking as good as possible but to avoid any major intervention until we get a decent dollop of rain.

A timely task which is still possible is hedge cutting,

traditionally yew hedges are cut this month, although even this is best avoided on searing hot days when newly exposed, lower layers, of foliage may scorch if very hot and dry.

Looking ahead to next spring, which I always find a little depressing as, to my mind, it signals the end of summer, now is the time to order autumn planted, spring flowering, bulbs. They need to go into the ground as soon as possible, after delivery, assuming by then we'll have had enough rain to soften the ground. Of course, I am hoping that, by concentrating on how hot and dry it's been, the weather Gods will have been triggered to deliver the rain we need to make all this watering advice out of date—fingers firmly crossed!

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