



OCTOBER IN THE GARDEN

By **Russell Jordan**



When I last wrote there was no hosepipe ban in force; by publication time 'Wessex Water' had introduced a ban, apparently the first since the infamous 'Summer of '76'. At the time of writing, the ban is still in force. This is understandable, given the lag behind any rain falling and the groundwater replenishing or reservoirs refilling. Fortunately, we had the first rainfall not long after the ban was introduced so, as far as the garden is concerned, conditions have become more 'normal'.

What isn't 'normal' is the stress that the summer drought has put on established trees and shrubs. Many trees, beech seems to have been particularly susceptible, started shedding leaves well before 'proper' autumn began. Now that we are well into autumn, leaves will have started falling and these will need to be raked up, from lawns, in order to give the recovering grass access to light for as long as possible. Hopefully, the completely brown, apparently dead, sward has already returned to green and your mower has been pressed back into service.

Last month, I suggested resowing dead patches in the lawn and this can continue in October. Germination will take place as long as the average temperature stays above around 7°C. Having said that, I've found, by experience, that sowing grass seed works even 'out of season', especially if the seeded area is protected with something like horticultural fleece. Grass seed is so inexpensive that experimenting with operations like over-sowing, patch repairs and late sowing is not going to break the bank.

Now that herbaceous plants are dying down, in readiness for winter, it's the last chance to collect seed from suitable plants. If you're not sure whether the seed is best sown straight away, or stored to be sown in the spring, then try both – you have nothing to lose and experimenting is one of the joys of gardening.

Plants are generous by nature; collecting a few seeds, and experimenting with them, is all part of the 'gardening thing'.

While in the garden, looking for seed to harvest, you will probably find plenty of herbaceous perennials that are past their best and need to be cut back, or down completely, so that the remaining plants are shown off to their best. This is especially pertinent this year because some plants will have prematurely faded, gone to seed, due to drought, and then had a second flush once the rain arrived. Herbaceous geraniums, the stalwart of many borders, are a case in point and their second flush of flowering growth is easily obscured if all the old material is left *in situ*.

Dahlias are traditionally left in the garden until 'blackened by the first frost'

Hopefully you will have purchased, either remotely or from a physical supplier, such as 'Groves', a wide selection of spring flowering bulbs. If you are creating gaps, where you have cut down herbaceous perennials, then maybe fill these with a suitable autumn planted bulb. You'll need to consider the flowering period of the bulb, and flowering height, in relation to its position in the border. Low flowering bulbs, such as crocus, *Iris histrioides* / *reticulata*, the ubiquitous *Narcissus* 'Tête-a-Tête', need to be placed towards the front of the border if they are to be seen, in early spring, amongst the emerging herbaceous foliage.

Taller and later flowering bulbs, tulips and alliums (ornamental onions) are chief amongst these, can be planted further back in the border as their blooms will

still be visible even once the surrounding perennial plants have grown up around them. This is also advantageous so that the larger leaves of the taller spring bulbs are mostly hidden by the general melange of the mixed border. Small bulbs, at the front of borders, generally have less obtrusive foliage which dies down before it can become unsightly. It's for this reason that I don't mind planting dwarf narcissus (daffodils) in borders but the taller, more statuesque, varieties are better off in 'naturalised' drifts, in wild areas of grass or in light shade, because it's very difficult to disguise their rather unattractive mush of dying leaves in an ornamental situation.

While looking forward to spring, with autumn planted bulbs, it's also important to think about the approaching winter and to consider any tender perennials that you may have out in the garden. These will need lifting / potting up, in order to be overwintered in a greenhouse or other protected space, and this is best done while they are still active enough to produce new roots once they have been disturbed. Cannas should be dealt with sooner rather than later as potting is more necessary to get them through the winter. Dahlias are traditionally left in the garden until 'blackened by the first frost' and their tubers are allowed to dry, once lifted, so timely potting up is not required.

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