

There truly is something behind the mantra “Fall is for Planting” heard this time of year. It is not a marketing ploy by nurseries and garden centers to get you to buy more plants.

So here it is again: “Fall is for Planting”. Why? Well, there are many reasons gardeners might choose to plant in the fall.

Perhaps the least obvious or noticeable, but definitely the reason at the top of my list, is because of the life cycle of a perennial and its morphology as it moves into the dormant period.

The term ‘life cycle’ refers to the series of stages an organism passes through before starting again. In an annual (which you do **not** plant in the fall), the life cycle from seed germination to foliage growth to flowering and producing more seed, to the death of the plant, happens in a one-year period.

However, in a perennial, after seed production the plant does not die: it goes dormant. During dormancy, in the coldest time of the year (and, in the Okanagan, the period when there is the least sunlight), deciduous shrubs and herbaceous perennials, with a few exceptions, look dead. The leaves dry out and fall – often after a spectacular display of colour – the plant ceases producing flowers, the stems often disintegrate to the point where you cannot see much of them aboveground. However, much like a dormant lawn in the summer, it is anything but dead.

It is **below** ground, in soil that is still warm from the hot summer months, that things are really happening. As the foliage growth, flowering, and seed production is winding down, the plant’s energy (food production through photosynthesis) is being redirected to the root system. This reallocation of resources results in growth below ground where we cannot see it. The plant is readying itself for the cooler winter temperatures ahead.

Getting back to planting or transplanting in the fall now, how do you think this ‘hidden’ growth affects the plants? The benefits are readily apparent in the following growing season. Plants that have been moved from pot to soil (or transplanted) respond by breaking dormancy with stronger growth, growing well throughout the season (provided other cultural requirements are met), and, if it is a flowering specimen, producing more flowers.

Another reason to plant in the fall is the weather: milder and less dry. This makes the period of adjustment to a new location (also referred to as ‘transplant shock’), less of an issue. In the fall, plants do not need to battle soaring temperatures during the day and water is less likely to evaporate, leaving your plant material thirsty. In comparison, plants going into new ground in the late spring or early summer may not have much time to adjust before our sizzling heat arrives.

The cooler fall weather not only benefits the plant, it benefits the gardener as well. Although most of us enjoy the hot summer days, I feel somewhat relieved when it’s not uncomfortably warm being outdoors working in the garden, whomever’s garden it might be. Whether I’m planting, preparing the garden for winter, harvesting edibles, or topping up the organic mulch, it’s physically easier to garden this time of year. Should I get overheated, I simply remove an outer sweater or jacket.

Another plant type that must not be overlooked in the fall is the bulb. Bulbs that brighten up our late winter and early spring days next year must be planted before winter arrives. It's also a great time for seeding Eco-Lawn, a low-water, low-maintenance seed blend.

Do you need more convincing? Have a look at your fall garden. Are there holes or areas where some extra colour would be appreciated? Make some notes, then head to your favourite nursery or garden centre. You will be able to select hardy bulbs (which are 'dry' plants) and, although the selection will not be as expansive as in the spring, you may find the perfect perennial, shrub or tree at a great price.

For more on how to plant in the fall, or how to put your garden to bed for the winter, check out Okanagan College's fall brochure or call the Penticton centre to register for the September 17 courses.

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