It's easy to tell the arrival of fall these days. The Christmas toys and decorations go on the shelf in most stores. The stores say it's because of customer demand, but somehow I doubt that. What I hate most about the Christmas stuff is not that they are trying to sell us more things, but that the gardening stuff disappears. Now if it were November, I probably wouldn't mind as much, but September! Come on, I'm still planting, harvesting and watering in September. I NEED GARDENING STUFF—not Christmas stuff!! In fact there are still things to do in your garden.

There is still time to divide your perennials. Dividing perennials is a way to increase the number of plants without buying more. Many perennials keep on giving when it comes to increasing. It's easy to do with a bit of physical effort. Water the plants the day before so the digging is easier. Circle the plant with your shovel about 6 to 12 inches beyond the plant's perimeter. If it's a really large plant it might take some prying to get it out, but take care to limit the root damage. Without good roots the plant will die. Once the plant is out, gently remove some of the soil around the roots. You will need to see the structure of the plant to see the best place to divide it. Natural dividing places will appear more obvious. Use a knife, sharp shovel or pruning shears depending on how tough the root system is. Once you have them separated, replant, cut the foliage back to about 4 inches, water and take care of them like you would any new plant.

I was looking through my files to find something interesting to write about and found a note that in 2004 the first frost didn't hit (in Camp Verde) until November 14. I think I put the note in the file because it was the latest freeze I had ever seen. But now it doesn't seem that uncommon. Pretty soon we will be planting like we live in Phoenix where winter is the gardening season and not summer. Right now I'm hoping for a freeze as soon as possible. It's always good to have an early freeze when the garden hasn't been very good. Those green tomatoes will never ripen so what is the point. Pull them out!

If we are really lucky the correct combination of cool nights and warm days will cause shrubs and trees to turn brilliant colors. If we are not so lucky they freeze, turn brown and dangle there looking ugly til the wind blows them away. A few times with the warmer winters I've seen trees never really lose their leaves. I've seen fruitless mulberry trees survive the winter with green leaves. Not many,
I admit, but I admired their fortitude. Speaking of fortitude I had a hummingbird stay all winter last year. I kept thinking of taking down my feeders and this guy kept showing up. Considering how cold it was last year, I was amazed, but there he was nearly every day. Apparently my house and yard were his winter refuge.

Now that I’ve ranted about the stores putting out Christmas stuff too soon, I’m going to have to backtrack a bit as one of the good signs of winter is the appearance of Amaryllis. Big and bold and colorful, they are not everyone’s cup of tea, but I tend to swoon (a little) when I see them. I want them all! I want a yard full of them; I want a house full of them. And yes some can grow in your yard. Look for those outside of the Christmas season and look for Hippeastrum, their proper Latin name. They are elegant, they are bold, they are interesting and easy plants. Check them out.

I remember when mums were mostly used for corsages. You didn’t really grow them in your garden. They had those big pom-pom mums seen at a lot of proms. You had spider mums that graced more than their fair share of weddings and other formal occasions as table decoration. A potted mum was sometimes given as a gift when you were in the hospital. It hit the trash as soon as you were out. But today they are everywhere and they still make a terrific fall-blooming garden plant. The trouble is you never see those big pom-poms anymore or the spider ones. All you see today are the daisy/zinnia looking ones. I’m sure I’m dating myself but in the past there were a lot more interesting mums to choose from. There were ones with really interesting petals and the color range was bigger, not just rusty-colored or yellow and one shade of purple. What happened to all those great mums? The big beautiful ones you buy for table dec-

My least favorite sign of winter is all the talk about snow. Like snow is something to look forward to. I know snow and I don’t live in Arizona for the snow! I couldn’t care less if it snows. Yes, it looks pretty for about 10 minutes and then it loses its allure. It’s cold and wet, and for me, more layers of clothing don’t make it better. It’s dangerous to drive on, especially in Arizona because people here apparently think there is no difference in a snow-covered road and dry pavement. They seem to drive the same regardless. Sometimes you actually have to shovel it out of the way, one of the worst tasks ever! Then when it melts, it just creates mud and more mud. Never could figure out why people get so excited about spring in snowy climates. It should really be called the mud season.

If you see or hear any of these things, it’s close to winter. Clean up your garden and then take a moment and make yourself a cup of hot chocolate or a Midnight Snowstorm cocktail and enjoy the memories of your summer garden.

2 oz white crème de menthe
hot chocolate
1/2 oz green crème de menthe
whipped cream

Preparation:
1. Pour white crème de menthe and hot chocolate into an Irish coffee glass.
2. Top with whipped cream.
3. Drizzle the green crème de menthe on top.
73 people attended this year’s picnic. A good time was had by all.

Recognition awards were presented to:

**50 Hours**
Russ Baker  
Shari Dutton  
Hope Fonnet  
Kara Giannetto  
Paula Hilton  
Virginia Mullins  
Susan Peterson  
Kathy Sisley  
Linda Sanzo

**150 Hours**
Marcia Benjamin  
Trudy Black  
Bob Busch  
Barbara Cregier  
Eileen Ferguson  
Kris Holt  
Donna O’Rourke  
Steve Troutner  
Jennifer Young

**250 Hours**
Christi Armer  
Anita Fleming  
Lisa Gerber  
Bob Gessner  
Pete Heisinger  
Merle Herrick  
Diane Nault  
Paul Schnur

**500 Hours**
Jonella Blake  
Judy Cowan  
Eric Downing  
John Doyle  
Kay Gaffney  
Tom Konzem  
Betty Loos  
Steve McIntyre  
Cathy Michener  
Steve Moody

**1000 Hours**
Bobbie Jo Gooslin  
Dolores Johnson  
Bev Turnbull

**1500 Hours**
Bob Burke  
Herdis MacLellan  
Linda Scheerer  
Sue Smith

**5000 Hours**
Beverly Emerson

**Emeritus Awards**
PJ Ames  
Jonella Blake  
John Paustian  
Eunice Ricklefs
John Paustian, Emeritus

Eunice Ricklefs, Emeritus

Nancy Gibson
As of the first of October (when I am writing this) there are three things going on in the garden that I am paying attention to. One is planting garlic. Even at the first of November you could probably stick a few cloves in the ground and get some garlic come spring. It might not be as big as it should be but garlic is good in any size.

Anyhow, I’m digging up one of my beds to plant garlic and I am continually digging up potatoes that I missed this spring. The good news is that they all have roots or sprouts on them; so back in the ground they go. So I guess the message is plant potatoes now. Someone gave me a bunch of potatoes a couple of years ago and they have treated me well. Surprisingly the purple ones produce like crazy, although they tend to be small, while the Yukon golds were bigger. The red potatoes got completely lost until I started digging when I found a couple.

The third thing that is going on in my yard is the sweet potatoes. They have gone completely crazy, filling the bed with their dense vines and thick crop of leaves. Does this mean I will have a bumper crop of sweet potatoes? I don’t know but if past experience is something to judge by I will have more sweet potatoes than I know what to do with. What a dilemma to have.

It’s often tough to figure when to dig sweet potatoes. Some say wait til it freezes but if you are anxious, pick them about the time your soil starts to hit 50°F. Below 50 they are prone to rot in wetter conditions. As long as the vine is green the potatoes themselves are growing; they just keep getting bigger. Be very careful when digging the roots up, even the tiniest damage can cause the potato to rot prematurely.

Once you do dig them sweet potatoes need to be cured. If you eat them right out of the ground they will be starchy tasting and not sweet. Let them dry for a day outside. Then they need a dark and humid place to cure for about 10 days. The hard part is finding a humid place. The temperature should be about 80-85°F, humidity should be 85-90%. To raise the humidity you can store in perforated plastic bags. The bags keep the humidity up but allow air circulation.

A suggestion from a local farmer might work also. Create a rack of some sort. Chicken wire on a frame would work. Take your frame and prop it up on blocks, (concrete blocks or bricks would work.) Lay the potatoes out on the rack. Cover them with something that breathes, (canvas or perforated plastic might work) and then simply keep the soil damp below the rack. You are going to have to figure out what works best for you conditions because your results will depend on air circulation, temperature and the humidity in your situation. The rack should be placed in a shady area; you do want to avoid direct sun. Whichever method you use after 10 days store the potatoes in a dark area with good air circulation and you should have sweet potatoes for months.

One of my favorite dishes to make with them is really simple and you can make it for 1 or 10. I slice them thinly and put the slices in a microwave-safe dish. Sprinkle a bit (to your taste) of brown sugar over them; add a handful of cranberries and a handful of pecans and a small amount of water. Microwave until soft. YUM! If you are a griller, steam the sweet potatoes and then slice into ½ inch slices, brush with vegetable oil and grill for about 7 minutes each side.

Sweet Potato-Tomato Soup
The Victory Garden Cookbook by Marian Morash

2 large ripe tomatoes
1 carrot
1 stalk celery
2 tablespoons butter
8 cups beef stock
1 ½ pounds sweet potatoes
salt and pepper
Garnish with sour cream

Peel, seed, juice and chop the tomatoes. Finely slice or chop carrot and celery. Melt butter in a 4-quart saucepan and cook carrot and celery until soft but not browned. Add tomatoes and stew until vegetable liquids are slightly evaporated; add stock. Peel and thinly slice sweet potatoes and mix together with vegetables and stock, bring to a boil, reduce heat and gently cook until potatoes are very soft, 20-30 minutes. Purée in a food processor or pass through a medium sieve. Season to taste and serve with sour cream on top.

Serves 6-8
To make a cream soup, chill and stir in ¾ to 1 cup of heavy or sour cream just before serving.
Last month I talked about bulbs in the garden but there are a number of bulbs that you can grow in pots and “force” so they bloom in the dead of winter. This isn’t a matter of holding your bulbs at gunpoint but with some slight of hand and confusion you will trick the bulbs into blooming. There are three methods. They are pebbles & water, just water and forcing in soil.

Pebbles & Water
This is easy. Use a waterproof container and fill with gravel or a decorative stone. Firmly place the bulbs on into the stones. Fill the container with water up to the base of the bulbs but no higher. You do not want the water to touch the bulbs. If you use a glass container you can watch the bulbs begin to sprout roots and make sure you have enough water in the container. To keep them from being floppy and leggy put in a dark spot for four to six weeks before you bring them into warmer temperatures. Hyacinths, crocus, daffodils or early tulips work with this method.

Just Water
Ever started an avocado? Well this is the same technique. Stick toothpicks in three to four places around the bulb. Find a glass container that the bulb fits in and where the rim is a diameter that will hold the toothpicks supporting the bulb. The water should come up to just below the bulb. You do not want to over fill. Put in a dark cool space for four or five weeks and then bring into the house. Hyacinth bulbs work well with this method. Special vases have been used since Victorian times just to force Hyacinth.

Soil Forcing
This method is not that easy in our climate, they want to flower in what most people call mid-winter whether we want them to or not. Forcing with this technique is really something for real cold climates. Here are the basic steps:

Bulbs go through several stages of development. When you buy them they are dormant and ready to plant. Once planted, the second stage is the growth of the roots. The bulbs don’t need light yet—they just need the right temperature. Most bulbs need 12 to 16 weeks of 45°F temperatures after potting to create a good root system. If the temperatures drop below freezing, the root stops growing, sometimes freezing and rotting. Stage three is the growth of the leaves. They start growing when the temperature is 55 to 65 degrees, which unfortunately, is where most of our winter temps are. The fourth stage is blooming. This happens when the temperatures warm to 70-75°F.

Because of our warm temperatures this isn’t a slam dunk, but if you are willing to put in the effort you can confuse the bulbs and get them to bloom when you want them to. It will probably only work well in colder areas. Before I go any further I want to point out that it would probably just be easier to buy already potted bulbs from the nursery.

The key is to maintain the 45°F temperature. Pot up the bulbs, preferably in a shallow pot. Dig a trench or hole in a colder, shady area of your yard and bury the potted bulbs in the trench before it starts to freeze.

Mulch heavily with straw, leaves or mulch. Keep the mulch damp, not soggy. If the bulbs get too wet they will rot. Did you know tulips come from some very arid climates? Anyway, check the bulbs periodically to see if they have formed roots. If roots are growing out of the bottom of the pot it is time to move the potted bulbs to a warmer location. You can also remove the root ball from the pot to check for roots. Continue watering the plants as necessary.

Once the plant starts to warm up, you will see leaves and then, hopefully, blooms. Forced bulbs rarely bloom again, so plan on starting with new bulbs next fall.

Tulips, some daffodils, crocus and hyacinths are the best blooms for forcing. Blooming plants are always wonderful in the middle of winter but really, maybe just buy something from the nursery.
FROM THE EDITOR: Please send or email articles and announcements to the address below. All articles must be in my hands by the 10th of the month. Short announcements (no more than 2 or 3 lines) will be accepted until the 25th.

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Next Meeting

November 16, 6:30pm
Camp Verde

Our speaker for November will be our very own Merle Herrick speaking on "The Science of Soil". Merle will talk about what really goes on in the few inches beneath the garden soil, what makes up the universe of microbes, bacteria, fungi, and other useful and interesting critters, and how to replicate good soil in your own garden.