

Quick Tips for the October Garden

Tip for quick, daily upkeep: Get organised before you take that stroll

I find the best way to manage my garden and still retain its wildlife friendliness, is in small time-bites, for it's too easy to get carried away when you're armed with a long to-do list and chunks of time and so end up doing too much. I think neither plant nor animal enjoys too much interference, don't you?

I now combine my daily strolls through the garden with a little upkeep by tucking into whatever grabs my attention, like cutting off any weeds in flower; adding a handful of leaf compost to an exposed soil patch; pulling out grass stolons encroaching on the front-of-bed *Crassula capitella*; trimming back any exuberant foliage that threatens to smother the emerging leaves on the *Hypoxis colchicifolia*. And each day you'll notice something different needs being done. A little organisation and preparation - strategic rather than onerous - are necessary though to improve the efficiency and success of this style of management. Like a handily placed carry-all at the front door; mine is light-weight and washable, and fits secateurs, a reusable plastic bag for weeds, gloves and trowel – oh, and space for the camera bag, for there are always insects and flowers to photograph. I have an ongoing pile of decomposing leaves conveniently placed between the house and the garden, making it quick and easy to scoop moist handfuls from the bottom of the pile or grab a mix of new and old for a rough-leaf mold mulch. A small garden 'bucket' on wheels, small and light enough to pull with one hand, stands nearby, ready to grab and fill as needed. As a matter of interest, this 'bucket' has doubled as a rainwater collector beneath a dripping gutter waiting to be fixed. What I love about this system is that I keep on top of the critical tasks, like weed control, and, with such short and gentle interference I still get to observe the fascinating world of insects up close.

Deadheading: Leave a few old flowers and seed heads for insects; some eat the seeds, others use the softer seeds to line nests; tuck those cut off under leaves of nearby perennials.

Needing to replace dead patches of ground-hugging groundcovers like *Dymondia*?

Firstly have new plugs ready to plant by thinning out an overgrown or tightly packed section. Cut off the bottom end of an empty tin, large or small depending on the size needed, and make holes in the top to let air escape and prevent a vacuum forming. Press down over the dead patch; the sharp tin edge neatly slices through the foliage. Lift with a trowel, add soil to the hole and plant new plugs or cuttings you have at the ready.

Self-seeded plants: What to pull out: Frequent strolls also alert you to self-seeded plants growing in inconvenient places, especially tree species. These can grow to head-height within the blink of an eye in a warm spring, especially pioneer species, which by their very nature, grow fast. If not handled while small, may need more than a pair of lopers to remove. *Protorhus longifolia*, *Bridelia micrantha* and *Trema orientalis*, all medium to large trees, are common pioneer species in my area, and they germinate freely in both my woodland section and in sunny garden beds through spring and summer. The latter I pull out but in the woodland may leave one or two.

Bag unwanted shrubs and offer them to your local SPCA nursery, friends or Keep Beautiful Association.

There are times when you can leave an opportunist even when conditions might not perfectly suit it; for example, a single *Hibiscus pedunculatus* now grows in a sunny bed where its position and small size are just fine. Despite it being a plant for light shade it is thriving. *Crocosmia aurea* is another shade plant that thrives if it germinates in a sunny bed in areas of moderate to good rainfall.

Spiders and Clivia bells

Some gardens are for viewing—you're meant to admire them, but don't really go out into them, suggests American landscape architect Bill Frederick; I imagine the gardener in charge would be a busy one. I prefer a busy garden - intermingling plants, decomposers at work on old wood; earthworms recycling compost into the layers beneath; evening frog calls and day-long bird activity. And insects of every size and shape at work wherever you look. To get the most from this type of garden, one must be curious; how else do you discover how the fresh, velvety bell of a young *Clivia miniata* is also the hunting ground for that tiny garden carnivore, the spider? In the heart of one flower, a tiny jumping spider lurks patiently waiting for an insect in search of pollen. He'll rely on stillness then speed of attack to catch his meal. In another bell, another spider, this one counting on camouflage for success, with a colour-matching abdomen. And it seems to have worked.