



September 2012

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## Putting Your Garden to Bed for the Winter

By Helen S. Munro

As the North Carolina summer begins to cool off and that first whiff of fall gives us a preview of what cooler days and even cooler nights will bring, it is time to put our gardens to bed for the winter. Many have written on this topic, but none with greater humor and good sense than Ruth Stout. Let me introduce you to Stout and her writings.

Stout was a gardener whose pictures always show her smiling, and her method of gardening seemed to contribute to that smile. Her message to gardeners is simple: MORE MULCH.

Ruth was born in 1884 and lived to be 96. Her books include *How to Have a Green Thumb Without an Aching Back* and *Gardening without Work*. The original books are out of print, but a revised *Gardening Without Work For the Aging, the Busy & the Indolent* published by Norton Creek Press can be purchased on-line.

The image I have of Stout's method is similar to how I burrow under a heavy quilt on my bed to keep out the winter chill. Stout's garden quilt is made of hay (regular or spoiled), straw, leaves, pine needles, sawdust, weeds, garbage (no meat) or any vegetable

matter that will decompose. Skeptics immediately raise their eyebrows thinking that the hay seeds will germinate, or that the pine needles and oak leaves will take forever to decompose.

Stout says, "I beg everyone to start with a mulch 8 inches deep; otherwise, weeds may come through, and it would be a pity to be discouraged [by weed growth] at the very start."

For Ruth this layer of mulch is not just for winterizing the garden. To quote her:

My no-work gardening method is simply to keep a thick mulch of any vegetable matter that rots on both my vegetable and flower garden all year round. As it decays and enriches the soil, I add more. The labor-saving part of my system is that I never plow, spade, sow a cover crop, harrow, hoe, cultivate, weed, water or spray. I use just one fertilizer (cottonseed or soybean meal)....

Because an 8-inch layer of mulch in my flower beds (where I also grow a few vegetables) may be too deep, I mulch with about three



inches of a nursery mix such as sold by T.H. Blue in Eagle Springs. I first rake up the leaves and clear the garden of all weeds and debris. Last year I blew an overcoat of leaves onto my roses. It gave their roots and stems something to "snuggle" under when the temperatures dipped below freezing. In the spring, I removed the leaves that had not decomposed and the roses were ready for spring and summer. I felt like they were smiling and saying "thank you."

The writings of Ruth Stout's are a pleasure to read. She is a "no nonsense" type of gardener with a positive attitude. She is known as the "Mulch Queen," and her gardening message is still timely thirty years after her death.

## Monthly Gardening Activities

By Susan Strine

- Finish light pruning of runaway shoots on evergreens in early September. Remove dead and diseased stems and branches on trees and shrubs. Do not start any major pruning until December. Remember pruning can remove buds on spring-flowering plants.
- Do not fertilize trees and shrubs now--wait until March and April. Fertilize annuals and fall-blooming perennials. Warm-season grasses should not be fertilized until the growing season begins next spring.
- Consider planting trees and shrubs from October through February. This allows roots to reestablish before hot, dry weather arrives. Remember to water regularly during the first growing season and during dry periods in following years.
- Take soil tests on your property. If they show your soil needs lime, apply it well in advance of next year's planting season.
- Add mulch around woody plants if it has gotten thin. Keep mulch away from trunks and stems to help avoid problems with disease and chewing animals. Chopped autumn leaves make a good mulch and they add nutrients back into the soil. Mulch perennials after the first killing frost.
- If you have a vegetable garden or want to start one next year, consider planting a beneficial cover crop. Buckwheat and crimson clover are good for large areas, and Austrian winter pea is useful in small gardens. Sow the chosen crop four weeks before fall's first-frost date (approx. 10/24) to give the plants time to become established.
- Clean plant debris from garden areas to remove insect eggs, diseased plant material, weeds, and places where insects and slugs could hide during winter.
- In early September, sow cool-season herb and vegetable seeds and plants. Some examples are cilantro, parsley, chives, leafy greens, and root crops. Watch for holes on cabbage leaves that are caused by caterpillars. Remove the caterpillars by hand or treat the plants with *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt).
- If needed, dig up, divide and replant overgrown spring-blooming bulbs, or plant new ones, anytime between late September and January. Fertilize with a bulb fertilizer, mixing one teaspoon into the soil at the root zone of each bulb.
- Bring houseplants indoors before temperatures dip below 50 degrees. If they have been in a sunny area, help them adjust to the lesser light indoors by putting them in a shady area for a week before bringing them in. Remove any hitchhiking snails and spray plants with horticultural oil or wash their leaves in soapy water to eliminate insects.

### Activities of Interest

By Alexis Pohlmeyer

#### Picnic in the Gardens

**When: Thursday, September 20; 5:30PM-8:30PM**

**Where: SCC Horticultural Gardens**

**This picnic supper is catered by Pik n Pig and features listening and dancing music by Glen Davis. Part of the proceeds will benefit the Landscape Gardening Department of SCC. Admission is \$30 for Horticultural Society members and \$35 for non-members. Contact Tricia Mabe for a reservation at 695-3882.**

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## Plant of the Month: Coleus

By Sandy McShea

I love coleus! I think it was one of my first very own childhood plants. They're brightly colored, they bring drama to shady areas, and they are easy to grow. They're a quick lesson in plant propagation too.



Photo by Sandy McShea

During the growing season, one healthy coleus plant can provide cuttings to populate your garden and the gardens of friends. To take cuttings, I just pinch off a top stem that contains at least two sets of leaves. I then remove the bottom set of leaves before sticking the cutting into a soil-filled pot so that the juncture of missing leaves is covered with soil. It's that easy--you don't need growth hormones, and you don't even need to cover the pot. But regular water is the key, both for cuttings and mature plants.

Coleus are tender perennials so they are not able to

survive Moore County winters. (They might, however, reappear in spring if the plant is allowed to go to seed.) That does not mean that you cannot enjoy coleus in winter months. The potted cuttings you take in fall can be brought indoors for longer enjoyment.

Coleus need never be boring, and plant breeders are working hard to

prove that point. The coleus of my childhood has been hybridized and improved many, many times so that we now have an ever greater array of color combinations and even coleus that enjoy sun. Go to Google Images, coleus, and be amazed.

One small note of caution: Some people have an allergic reaction to the diterpene coleonol found in coleus leaves. When this allergy is present a red rash may develop after contact with the leaves.

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## What's Bugging You?

By Sandy McShea

Although you might consider the caterpillars feasting on your carefully tended parsley, carrots or dill to be a nuisance, don't chase them away. They are really a prelude to the lovely and garden-pollinating black swallowtail butterfly.

From southern Canada to Florida, from the eastern states to the Rocky Mountains, and even as far south as Arizona and northern Mexico, the black swallowtail butterfly is a delight to the eyes and the garden. Sometimes called the American or parsnip swallowtail, this colorful butterfly begins life as an equally attractive caterpillar that is sometimes derisively called "the parsley worm." Yes, these eating machines can devour your parsley in very short order, but you've gotta admire their art deco



coloration--yellow, black, white and lime green--and more importantly, their future life as pollinating black

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# Gardening Questions?

Call the MGV  
Hotline

(910) 947-3188



Monday - Friday

10 am - Noon

March - October

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swallowtail butterflies.

The life cycle of the black swallowtail starts when a female butterfly lays small round, cream-colored eggs on the leaves of a host plant. Some people surmise that the eggs, which look like bird droppings, are designed this way to protect them from predators. The caterpillars that hatch from these eggs begin life dressed in uninspiring black, but subsequent moltings create large, astoundingly beautiful adults that can reach up to two inches in length.

Equipped with efficient chewing mouth parts, the caterpillars are known to prefer feeding on members of the parsley family such as carrots, parsley, dill, fennel, caraway, celery, common rue, and Queen Anne's lace. They are also attracted to native plants such as mock bishopweed, roughfruit scaleseed, spotted water hemlock, and water cowbain. Once they have eaten their fill, the caterpillars retreat into a pale green chrysalis where they spend the winter months.

Come spring, the striking black swallowtail butterfly emerges. With wings that can span to 4-1/2 inches, the swallowtail is a sight to behold. It is easily recognized by its yellow markings near the margins of its fore and hind wings and the few blue and red markings on its hind wings. If you compare several butterflies, you'll be able to pick out the males thanks to their brighter colors and greater amount of yellow, while in contrast the duller females show more blue.

Now ready to pollinate your garden, these lovely creatures can be seen (to the delight of both children and adults) flitting from flower to flower. And what a valuable lesson to children about the intriguing life cycle of one of nature's great designs.

To ensure that these helpful and beautiful creatures return to your garden each year, try planting more parsley or dill than you could ever eat. The swallowtails will reward you.



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*Disclaimer: Dig This is produced by the Moore County Master Gardener Volunteers (MGV) in conjunction with the NC Extension Service. Its purpose is to share with the general public some of the MGV's enthusiasm for gardening and some of their activities. The information contained herein is based on sources that the Master Gardener Volunteers believe to be reliable, but they do not represent that the information herein is accurate or complete.*