



Photo by Brenda Sharp

This dogwood shrub (Cornus alba 'Ivory Halo') with its bright variegation and red stems is a good candidate for fall planting. It is hardy to zone 3 and won't be bothered by our cold, wet springs.

The Dirt on Fall Planting

By Cathy Slavin

It's often said that "Fall is for planting" and it's more than a good advertising slogan for nurseries and plant brands. The weather in fall is a little cooler and the sun is a little less strong, providing newly installed plants (not to mention the gardener!) with a reprieve from more stressful summer conditions. Plants can settle into their new location and can focus on root growth before the harsher winter conditions arrive and the plants go into dormancy.

So what is the right time for fall planting? I try to get plants in the ground six to eight weeks before a hard frost (28°F). According to the National Gardening Association, our average first hard frost is historically around mid-November. Working backwards, that means you'll want to have your planting completed by no later than early October.

There are two categories of plants that it's probably best NOT to plant now. The first is plants that are borderline hardy. Sometimes we gardeners push the boundaries and try plants that would be happier in warmer locations. I've discussed previously that our zone designation is based on temperatures alone and doesn't take into account our cold, wet springs. I usually don't

plant zone 7 plants at all despite our zone 7a designation. I definitely wouldn't try to plant them in fall. I would also hesitate to plant a zone 6 plant in the fall—why take a chance?

The other category of plants I do NOT install in the fall is plants that don't like wet feet because they would struggle in their first cold, wet spring. This includes all ornamental grasses (carex is a sedge and can be fall-planted), and shrubs and perennial plants labeled as 'drought tolerant,' such as Russian sage, salvia, lavender and sedum.

So what can you plant in the Fall? Pretty much everything else. For best results, lean toward extremely hardy trees, shrubs and perennials. Given our hardiness zone designation of 6b/7a, I'd lean toward plants that are hardy to zone 5 (preferably hardier) and ones that won't be upset by having wet feet in spring. This will include many native trees, shrubs (dogwoods, redbuds, viburnums, blueberries, hollies, junipers, cedars) and perennials that don't mind wetter soil such as hardy hibiscus, astilbe, irises and hostas. Peonies are famously fall-planted.

All this assumes you have soil that drains readily. If you have clay, wait for spring or plant high, positioning the top of the root ball an inch or two above soil level (you can mulch around the root ball above the soil). As with any recently planted plants, remember to water transplants well and ensure they get a drink every 5-7 days (either from you or mother nature) until they go dormant or the ground freezes.

The planting window for bulbs is different from other plants. Many bulbs need several weeks of cold temperatures to perform but you also need to be careful that they don't start growing right away. For this reason, I usually wait until mid-November or so when the soil and air temperatures have dropped to between 40 and 55°F.

Fall is my favorite season. The temperatures become more comfortable and there's a crispness in the air, replacing the heat and humidity of summer. Apart from autumn leaf cleanup (which can be a monumental undertaking!), there is less need to perform other garden tasks. It's a time to do some planning and planting and begin to anticipate how much better the garden will be next year. (Have I already forgotten about the Japanese beetles, earwigs and rabbits?)

To garden is to let optimism get the better of judgement.

– *Eleanor Perenyi*