

*Between Hurricane Ike last year and the heat and drought this year, my yard needs a facelift. Is it ok to plant this month now that the worst of the heat is behind us?*

Yes! September is a good month for planting trees, shrubs, and perennials. It is still pretty hot in September but you are right, the worst is behind us. The next three months are actually the best time of year to plant anything that is winter hardy. You will have to water more frequently in September than you would if you started in Oct/Nov, but the benefit is an extra month of root establishment before dormancy begins. Planting now allows a few months of low environmental stress to promote healthy root establishment before the ensuing flush of new growth in the spring. The end result will be a healthier plant more equipped to handle stress when our temperatures increase again next summer. Avoid regular fertilization until spring but apply a root stimulator solution after planting and reapply every two weeks until the end of October. Planting now is not only good for root establishment; it can be good for your bank account because you can usually find end-of-season deals on winter hardy landscape plants. If you need to fill some space with annual color, you can still get a good show for a couple of months out of summer annuals like Coleus, Marigolds or Begonias or you can wait until Oct/Nov to plant Pansies and other cool season annuals.

*I plant garden mums and Texas asters every September. What can you recommend for companion plants that will look good when I plant my pansies?*

September can be a tricky month for planting seasonal color. It is still too hot to plant most of our cool season annuals but will be cold soon enough that it hardly seems worth it to plant summer annuals. Here are a few suggestions:

Croton – I think God may have had fall combination plantings in mind when He created Crotons. I just wish they were more cold tolerant. The colorful red, yellow, orange, and green hues of the variegated glossy foliage are like harbingers of autumn when planted this time of year. Foliage color looks best when planted in more light, which makes it a good companion for your Mums. If you are concerned about losing Crotons to cold weather, they can be replaced with cool season annuals and repotted as houseplants for the winter.

Rudbeckia – There are many new varieties of this garden classic. The best standard Black-eyed Susan cultivar is ‘Goldsturm’ for ease of growing and performance, but I prefer cultivars like ‘Radiance’ and ‘Irish Spring’ because of the increased flower size. The seed head on ‘Irish Spring’ is green instead of brown and you would be hard pressed to find a larger flowered cultivar. If deadheaded, Rudbeckia will continue to bloom until our first freeze and is perennial.

Chrysocephalum – I wish I had an easier name for this plant, but there is not a good common name. I have heard it referred to as Strawflower, but that name is used most commonly for Bracteantha (another good fall plant). It is hard to pronounce but easy to grow. This heat and drought tolerant plant has orange or yellow flowers (Flambe is the best variety) and is vastly underutilized in landscapes in our area. It is a tough summer plant that looks great in a fall landscape because it is loaded with blooms right up until we get a hard freeze. It is hardy to USDA Zone 9 so even if it gets knocked back by a

freeze, it is likely to come back in the spring. You'll like it in the fall but you'll love it in the summer!

Erysimum 'Citrona' – Not all Erysimum are as hardy as the 'Citrona' series, but this cultivar will bloom throughout the winter until around May. Growing 18-24" tall, this Erysimum not only provides excellent fall color, it is also very fragrant. You may not be able to find this plant until late September, but it will look great with Mums and can be used with Pansies in the winter. It will usually survive our summer heat, but I prefer to use it as a winter annual since it will not bloom in the heat.

Gaillardia 'Torch' – So many of the newest Gaillardia (Blanket Flower) cultivars have been a disappointment in Texas. They look great in plant catalogs but do not hold up well in our heat and humidity. It is not uncommon for these weak cultivars to get powdery mildew and crash after one good cycle of blooms. The reason for this disappointment is that plant breeders have been using a species that does well in the northern US instead of the Texas native species. 'Torch' is bred from the same species of Blanket Flower that covers fields and roadsides in Texas summers. 'Torch Yellow' and 'Torch Red Embers' have a mounding growth habit and bloom throughout the summer until our first hard freeze. Like the Texas wildflower, 'Torch' Gaillardia is not a true perennial. While they may survive our mild winters, it is usually reseeding that brings them back the next year.

Other good fall options for seasonal color include Dusty Miller, Petunias, Marigolds, and African Daisies.

*I want to plant a groundcover in a bed of shrubs to fill the open spaces. What do you recommend for partial sun, preferably with flowers?*

Ajuga 'Catlin's Giant' will quickly fill the areas you allow it to grow. 'Catlin's Giant' has larger leaves and flowers than other Ajuga cultivars and is undoubtedly the toughest variety available for our area. The bronze-green foliage spreads aggressively by stolons but can easily be kept out of turf with the use of an edger. Each spring the dense mat of foliage is topped with tons of 4" deep-blue flower spikes. If you can get a lawn mower in the area where you plant 'Catlin's Giant', you can put the mower on its highest setting to remove the flower spikes after blooming. Otherwise, removing the spent flower spikes by hand is about the only maintenance required to keep this Ajuga looking its best. It can be grown in sun or shade and is evergreen. Blooming and foliage color will be best with at least partial sun but it will require more water with increased sun exposure.

*I bought a Double Impatiens hanging basket that puts on flower buds but the flowers don't open and then the buds drop. What is causing this?*

While this could be caused by moisture stress, I suspect it is caused by thrips. Thrips are small, elongated insects that feed on flowers and leaves of many species of plants. They often cause the type of damage you are describing. Flowers that do open are often deformed or have necrotic spots on the petals. Foliar damage on Impatiens looks like small silver or yellow pinhole-sized spots on the leaf surface where they have fed. Thrips can be hard to see because they range from 1/25 to 1/8" in length. The best way to look

for thrips is to take a sheet of white paper and put it under the hanging basket. Shake or gently tap the leaves and flowers onto the paper. Adult thrips are usually yellow-brown or black and can be seen moving quickly across the surface of the white paper.

Unfortunately, there is not a great organic solution to controlling thrips. Products containing neem oil or citrus oil can be used weekly for moderate control, but systemic insecticides will provide the best control due to the fact thrips are often hidden deep in the unopened flower bud. Bayer Advanced™ makes a liquid 3-in-1 (fertilizer, insecticide, fungicide) product called All-In-One Rose & Flower Care™ that will quickly control thrips. This product makes application easy because there is no spraying; simply mix with water and use the solution to water the hanging basket.