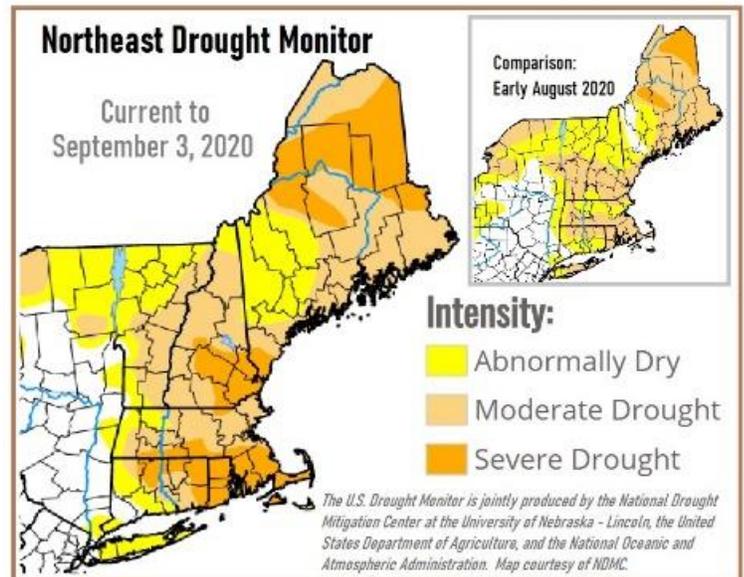


# Garden Club Horticultural Hints

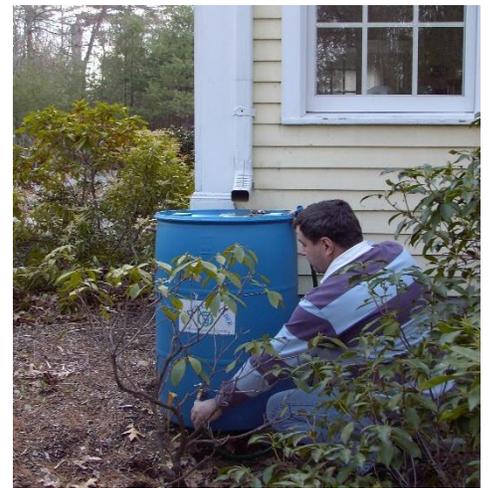
September 2020

Gardening: where social distancing is built in!

**Our drought worsens.** As the map shows, New England slipped deeper into drought during August, tightening watering restrictions region-wide. As the growing season winds down, focus on watering remaining vegetables and perennials. Trees and shrubs planted this year or last should be watered during the fall because they may not yet have large root systems. In order to maximize root growth in the fall and minimize winter root injury, a 3- to 6-inch layer of mulch should be used around your trees, plants and shrubs. Evergreens that brown during the winter are evidence that they ran out of available water. As for your lawn, don't water it. With cooler temperatures, it will green up on its own.



**It's a great time to start composting at home.** Buy (or build) a closed compost bin that give you a discreet place to recycle. Start with a layer of leaf mold (old leaves that are breaking down without any help from you) or compost from a friend. The bacteria and fungi that do the composting will be in there. Grass clippings (with or without leaves) can be added to your vegetable and fruit peelings, leftovers, or plants too far past their prime. Repeat throughout the fall and spring. Next year, you'll have the compost needed to give a boost to your new plantings and old beds!



**Look for water that can be reused.** Do you have a rain barrel? Capturing the water that runs off your roof is a smart solution to water bans. A quarter to a half inch of rain will fill the barrels connected to gutters on a home roof. With a watering ban in many towns this year, after cooking eggs or vegetables, the water shouldn't go down the drain. Some nutrients from these cooked foods will leach into the water and, once cooled, can be used to water (and feed) plants.

**Leave the leaves where they fall.** Mow them into the lawn to add nutrients. And stop bagging grass clippings! They will completely disappear in a couple of days unless you missed several weeks' mowings. Not only do you save work, you are returning necessary nutrients to the soil.



**Add to your garden soil's fertility.** Create a nutrient-rich base layer by collecting grass clippings and raked leaves to spread over the bed, as long as you didn't use "weed and feed" or other broad-leaf weed killers (flowers and vegetables are broad leafed). With vegetable gardens, usually we take away the plants that were growing there this year to reduce the possibility of diseases or insects from wintering over. But any vegetable plant not affected by disease or insects can be chopped, and left behind. The leaves from corn plants, the overgrown lettuce heads, the tops of carrots and so forth are a starting point. But don't forget all those leaves that fell on yours or your neighbors' lawns. Pick them up with your mower bag and they'll be shredded and ready to improve your vegetable garden.



*These corn stalks – cut into short lengths – will decompose into soil over the winter.*

**Renew a shrub.** Do you have a foundation shrub that is too tall, too wide, or shaggy? You can give it a makeover by pruning this fall. Removing a few of the branches will encourage the growth of new stems from the roots. Late this month, prune up to one-third of the oldest, thickest stems, down to ground level or just slightly above. In the spring, young healthy branches will quickly fill in the spaces you created. If it's a blooming shrub, you may have to wait another year in order to get flowers on those branches. But rejuvenating the shrub is the best way to keep it blooming and attractive as the years go by.



*At right, A hard trim of this physocarpus (ninebark) will result in a more compact plant next year. Shrubs can be cut to their base and re-grow the following season to a more manageable size.*

*Below: As your home garden winds down, plant a cover crop to enrich the soil for the 2021 season.*



**Don't forget cover crops.** Cover crops become "green manures" when a gardener turns them into the soil in the spring to provide organic matter and nutrients. Green manures include legumes such as vetch, clover, beans and peas; grasses such as annual ryegrass, oats, raprseed, winter wheat and winter rye; and buckwheat. For your home garden chose those that will grow in the fall and not need to be tilled under in the spring. You want to let Mother Nature do most of the work. Be wary of animal manure, though. Remember that not all weed seeds get digested, some manure can be too rich in one element, and that manure can carry dangerous pathogens. And it's not fun to spread on the garden.



*Your houseplants have had all summer to grow fresh foliage and expand their root systems. Reward your plants with a slightly larger pot and fresh potting mix.*

**Summer vacation is ending for your houseplants.** While it is still very warm outside, houseplants need to begin the transition back into your home. Any that have spent the summer outdoors should be brought onto a porch or deck where they receive less daylight, a step to help them acclimate to the lower light level in your home. Plants that have been in contact with the ground should be repotted to ensure worms, ants or pests are not tagging along.

Check for any obvious signs of insects on the leaves, stems and top of the soil. A strong spritz from the garden hose followed by spray of insecticidal soap can help to keep aphids, mites and others from causing problems indoors. Once you make the move indoors, don't despair if your plants drop a few leaves. The drier air and lower light levels mean the plant cannot support all the summer foliage. Many plants will replace the leaves after they have adapted to their winter quarters.

**Don't rake those leaves!** Take a look at the forest floor: it is covered with leaves. They provide the only nutrients the native trees get. They are the mulch that protects the roots and new seedlings. Traditionally, we rake leaves out from under trees and shrubs because it 'looks neater' and we think those leaves will form a mat. Instead, leave them in place. Some will break down over the winter, returning the nutrients to the soil in the process. Those that remain will help protect the roots and crowns of your plants as well as provide an over-wintering home for beneficial insects. Cleaning them out is a spring chore.



**Do you appreciate Monarchs?** Fall is time to collect milkweed seeds for next spring. Use only seed native to your area and pick only dry brown pods. Pods must be dry to ensure seeds are mature. Plant the milkweed in the fall in a sunny location by sprinkling seeds over loosened soil. Pat them down, add a thin layer of top dressing and water well. In the spring the plants should appear. Monarch caterpillars will be along to munch on the leaves several times through the summer. A variety of flowers throughout the summer will keep the monarch butterflies nearby.

*Written and created by Betty Sanders. For more horticultural suggestions for September and throughout the year, please visit [www.BettyOnGardening.com](http://www.BettyOnGardening.com)*