



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Is it fall yet?

“Astronomical fall” is the familiar one which begins September 22 or 23, the equinox when day and night lengths are the same.

September 1 is the start of “meteorological fall.” The Weather Channel informs us that this is “a neat, three-month period that helps meteorologists and climatologists organize and compare seasonal weather data more consistently over time.”

“Davis fall,” to me, begins when temperatures are in the 80s by day and the low 50s at night. That's usually mid-October, but cooler conditions are prevailing this year.

It's a great time of year to plant flowers, cool-season vegetables, shrubs, trees, and ground covers, and start planting grass seed and wildflower seed. It's also a great time to build your soil by mulching or growing cover crops. Mid-September through mid-November is a very active planting time here.

Summer garden wrap-up

We've had mostly very positive reports about the summer gardening season this year.

Cooler temperatures in June and July led to high fruit set on tomatoes, so most have had good yields.

I do a fruit count in early August. A couple of real standouts: Early Girl, Early Girl Plus, and New Girl each had 75 tomatoes per plant in August. In mid-September Early Girl and New Girl each had 60 new fruit developing (Early Girl Plus lagged with only 30).

We did experience some late blight dieback on tomato plants after a period of odd wet weather in August. But overall production has been consistent and, for those who deep-watered their tomatoes through August, fruit will be continuing to ripen through October. Unless it starts raining early.

Upcoming El Niño precautions

The magnitude of this upcoming El Niño event continues to startle meteorologists.

Climate scientist Daniel Swain, commenting on forecast models back in June, said that they indicate “a top-tier, very strong-to-historic event.” In a recent interview he explained further, “if you asked me for one single predictor in the global climate system that could provide three to six months’ advance notice of the potential for a very wet California winter, it would be a very strong El Niño.”

A Kelvin wave, a mass of very warm water moving across the Pacific toward our coast, is arriving and will move north adjacent to California in October and November. This could raise sea level by a foot, increasing beach erosion and flooding risks. Higher ocean temperatures have already decimated the Peruvian anchovy fisheries. For us, the warmer water means storms will be wetter. Storms will likely be numerous and we can expect saturated soil conditions, localized flooding, and increased disease problems.

Lots of questions about timing of planting, pruning, spraying, and weed abatement in the face of a predicted very wet winter!

- Don't dig a hole in soggy, saturated soil. Your shovel slicks the side of the hole and damages soil structure. Early rains may impact your landscape plans.



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- Raindrops spread plant diseases by splashing the spores. I expect we'll see increased levels of brown rot of stone fruits, peach leaf curl, citrus brown rot and citrus blast, eutypa disease on apricots, downy mildew on grapes, and more. Most of these can be prevented somewhat with dormant season sprays of copper and oil.
The severity of each disease will be determined by the timing of the rains and the temperatures that prevail at that time. Recommended timing varies by disease, and the spray needs to dry on the tree for several hours before the next rainfall. Finding a time to spray may be challenging. Raking up and disposing of the leaves under the trees in fall, and knocking off old fruit that didn't drop, can help.
- Annual winter weeds germinate with the first rains and grow rapidly when conditions are wet and warm. This would be a really good time to consider a deep mulch of arborist wood chips or bark.

Fall is a great time to build your soil.

“Building soil” refers to adding materials, choosing plants, and managing irrigation to improve soil structure. The goal is a soil that retains nutrients and water and makes them available to the growing plants, but drains excess water out of the root zone. It will have a crumbly texture, allow good water infiltration, and have enough living organisms to open pathways for air, water, and nutrients.

So how do you build soil?

The way to get healthy soil is to get interconnected root systems growing through the temporary strata of soil that we create (often via gardening activities), with deeper roots and animals creating macropores for the vertical movement of water and nutrients.

The goal is to have soil that enables roots to spread out and down. Even distribution of water and nutrients facilitates the ready growth and spread of the plant roots. Soil organic matter can help retain and then release water as well as the cations of the elements needed for growth.

Soils with unusually large amounts of organic material can be hard to manage for moisture and nutrients in arid climates. The organic part can become hydrophobic and require multiple hydrations. Tilled into just the top couple of inches, it can create a zone that requires different water management than the deeper soil. Better to leave the soil undisturbed mechanically if possible, so we apply mulch and let nature build the soil more gradually.

“No-till” practices are an outgrowth of this way of thinking. The soil web takes time to develop and breaking up the soil disrupts it. Since the soil web facilitates the availability and uptake of water and nutrients, disrupting it may end up requiring more inputs (water and especially fertilizers) for a year or so after that discing or tilling.

If you disc or till every year, you can get locked in to a high-input growing system. For agribusiness, that works. There is a direct correlation between synthetic nitrogen input and yield. But that comes at a cost of reduced soil health and degraded soil structure. The whole field of sustainable agriculture begins with caring for the soil by minimizing disturbance.



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Rather than incorporate large volumes of organic amendments, it's less disruptive to the soil to simply apply mulch on the surface continuously. That way the steady disintegration of the compost, movement by worms and other soil dwellers and fungal mycelia between the soil and the mulch results in a steady input of organic material into the soil. The shading of the soil by the mulch reduces water loss.

Mulch is anything that you spread on the surface of the soil around the plants. Compost, straw, arborist wood chips, and bark are common examples. Gravel and rock are also used; though they have fewer benefits to the soil, rock materials can make good paths or edgings. Cardboard and landscape fabric are used at times, each with specialized purposes and each with some drawbacks.

Mulch actually protects the soil. Bare soil exposed to sun and drought loses vitality very quickly and the soil structure changes. It's more compacted and has poor water infiltration. Roots can't penetrate readily.

New gardens are often rototilled to level them, or to mix in some compost and manure to add nutrients and improve soil 'tilth'. That's fine, but once the beds are established it's best not to turn the soil again. The best ways to improve soil structure are to grow cover crops, and mulch.

Cover crops for different purposes

A cover crop is simply a plant that we grow, usually from seed, for the purpose of improving the soil. Some 'fix' nitrogen from the atmosphere and leave it behind in the soil when you chop the tops down. Fava beans are among the best for this, and are considered edible by some people. They can be planted any time between October and January. Clover, vetch, and field peas are also good nitrogen-fixers. Please note that vetch can be a very effective cover crop, but also can reseed significantly.

Other cover crops are used to shade the soil, thereby reducing weed seed germination. Some, such as oats, simply grow faster than the weeds and shade them out. I've planted oats, sometimes mixed with field peas, to shade out foxtails. Strategic planting and mowing of cover crops can greatly reduce weeds. Grass cover crops are also especially suited to breaking up more compacted soils due to their aggressive adventitious root systems.

By comparison, tap rooted plants such as mustard create macropores. The roots grow down rapidly, pushing through even somewhat compacted zones, and then disintegrate in place when you cut down the tops. This improves water penetration by creating a small vertical channel for the faster movement of water and nutrients. Mustards and daikon radishes are especially effective for this. Mustard is even used as a cover crop to reduce root-knot nematodes.

Flowers to plant now

- Plant now from transplants for flowers this winter: pansies and violas, pinks, Iceland poppies, nemesia, salpiglossis, snapdragons, stock.
- Plant now from seed for flowers in winter and spring: calendulas, columbine, larkspur, sweet alyssum, sweet peas, California poppies, clarkias and godetias, and other native wildflowers.
- Plant biennials now for bloom next spring and summer: Sweet William, delphiniums, foxgloves, hollyhocks, Canterbury bells.



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Plant in your vegetable garden now

- Cole crops (brassicas): broccoli, cauliflower, collards, kale.
- Leafy greens: lettuce, arugula, endive, mizuna, mustard greens, radicchio, spinach, Swiss chard.
- Root vegetables: beets, carrots, radishes.
- Legumes: peas (shelling, snap, and snow peas) are all planted now. Watch for white-crowned sparrows! They love to eat the seedlings. Fava beans and field peas are also planted in fall.
- Garlic can be planted now. Onion starts are planted in November. Potatoes are best planted in spring, not fall.

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Dianthus Sweet William

Plant now! Sweet William is a biennial flower, meaning that you plant it one season for bloom the next. Planted in fall, it presents clusters of sweetly fragrant blooms on long stems that are great for cutting.



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Madia elegans flower cluster

One of our native wildflowers, madea or tarweed has a very long season of bloom in spring and summer. The flowers are sweetly honey-scented and attract many types of beneficial insects. Seed is typically purchased from wildflower seed specialists such as Theodore Payne Foundation, and is planted in fall or winter.



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California poppy

Plant with the first rains! Our most familiar wildflower. Seeds should be scattered just before a rainstorm onto open soil. Leave uncovered; poppy seed will not germinate if it is buried. Water daily if it doesn't rain.



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Pansies (shown here) and violas are still the most popular winter and spring annuals because of their cheerful colors and long season of bloom. Most will flower right through spring, even into early summer. Violas are less affected by rainfall as the flowers stay upright and the petals are less vulnerable to mold.



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Grown as a winter annual here, Iceland poppies are very cold tolerant and bloom during sunny periods in winter and heavily in early spring. Bees love poppies of all kinds. Plant now and through early winter.