



gardening

Rod Brown

Pot a geranium now, for a spring bonanza

This weekend gardener usually gets a little antsy right about now over whether or not it's the right time to bring in my small but varied collection of frost-sensitive bulbs.

Probably the best thing to do at this point is nothing. For the past three years, I have been digging up my gladioli right about now, cutting off the foliage and storing the bulbs in a cool but frost-free place on my sun porch. This year they didn't bloom very well at all.

When complaining ad nauseum to anyone who would listen — an ever dwindling group I might add — I was reminded of the fact that bulbs, the plant's food locker, get their nutrients from the above-ground foliage.

For gladioli, cannas, and primulas, wait until the first frost or two has killed off that top foliage naturally and then dig up the bulbs and store them. As is the case with most of my gardening ventures, we learn by doing — with a lot of help from my friends.

THIS IS my first season with calladiums, so I make no guarantees. But I'm led to believe that they, too, can be dug up, dried and stored with your bulbs over the winter. Calladiums can be dug up now. Dry them in a shady place for a few days, clean up their act a little bit and they are ready for storage.

"Storage," by the way, is going to have to be your own lonesome valley down which you will have to walk by yourself.

I have a small but snugly enclosed sun porch in which I keep my indoor plants and the ones I am wintering over. In it, I also keep a small space heater that Detroit Edison loves to have me run all winter long and that keeps the temperature around 50 degrees even in February.

This is apparently ideal enough that I have, on occasion, been able to winter over even a few tuberous begonias.

The important things here are: 1) Keep the bulbs, tubers, rhizomes, etc. dry — too damp and they will rot; and 2) Keep them cool — too cold and they will freeze, too warm and they never will go completely into the dormancy they have to have.

TO MULCH or not to mulch — that's the big question this time of year.

I have read that it takes only two Frenchmen to make a political party; it takes only one gardener to have an opinion on mulching with results that are much the same as politics in France — confusing and contradictory at best.

Spring bulbs really don't have to be mulched. In fact, if you get a little too eager and mulch them before the

heavy frosts of late fall, you are liable to find your Dutch iris trying bravely but vainly to bloom in November, as I discovered last year. 'Tis doesn't do the bulb a great deal of good at all. A heavy mulch also will tend to bring the bulbs up too early in the spring. I lost my Crown Imperials to last spring's late ice storm for that same reason. Again we learn by doing.

A good number of our standard kitchen herbs are from the Mediterranean. If the area is not Key West, it's not Athens or Genoa either. They will need help.

Most roses these days are hybrids grafted onto sturdier root stock. Just like the handle you had to glue onto the bone china teacup you probably shouldn't have tossed quite so carelessly into the dishwasher in the first place, the graft is strong. But it is still the weakest point in the plant.

Roses should have at least the graft covered over for the winter and to a depth of about 6 inches. This applies to anything else you may have that has been grafted, such as dwarf fruit trees. In the case of roses, the mulch you use can be important. Straw is best, because it is relatively disease free. Leaves are very good, but watch for black-spot in the spring.

STRAWBERRIES, raspberries and the rest of your perennials don't need it, but it helps keep the weeds down and the nutrients that will leach into the soil give them a good headstart in the spring.

I am told that a heavy mulch around the base of evergreens, especially newly planted ones, will keep the roots moist and allow them to grow all winter long. This remains hearsay for the time being, but I am going to try it this winter.

At any rate, gather ye mulch while ye may. Straw makes the best mulching material, but not all of us are blessed with 40 acres and a mule. Dead leaves and grass clippings are probably the handiest and cheapest thing available.

Shred them through the lawnmower first, or you will end up with a great mass of wet, suffocatingly matted leaves to get rid of in the spring. You'll have to remove much of the shredded mulch in the spring anyway, but the finer the mulch, the more that will rot, and thus the more that can be worked into the soil when those new shoots need a good dose of organic fertilizer to get them going again at full tilt.

The writer learned horticulture at his grandmother's knee, at Michigan State University, and as a weekend gardener.

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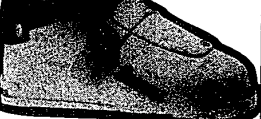
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