

When is It the Right Time?

By Gloria Hildebrandt

I have a problem with Autumn. Well, I have a few problems, but one big one is knowing when the outdoor part of the year is over. Autumn has long been my favourite season. The bugs have greatly diminished. The worst of the heat and humidity is over. The hard work of planting and growing is over—oh but then there's the harvest.

What to do with all that ripe produce? What was the point of working so hard in spring and summer, to plant and grow it, if not to harvest it? But when exactly should you harvest stuff? When is a zucchini the right size? It seems you wait a day or three because you've already eaten

some, and when you come back, you discover dark green baseball bats among the leaves. And cucumbers. Do you take them when they're pickling size or can you wait until they look like the ones in grocery stores? But wait too long and the seeds are sour and the flesh is tough. What time is the right time?

Last year I had two Beefsteak tomato plants growing in pots. I had two or three big tomatoes growing well on them. Then we went to Manitoulin Island for a couple of days, and when I got back, the ripe tomatoes were on the ground, half eaten. Probably by racoons. I spent spring and summer watering and weeding the tomato plants so the racoons could have a midnight snack? When

should I have picked those unripe tomatoes? Before I left for Manitoulin, obviously.

Prolific Produce

I have the same problem with apples. When should they be picked? When are they perfectly ripe? When are they big enough, red enough? I don't like it when they fall to the ground, although they're probably perfect then. But if you're not there at the exact moment, wasps and ants can get at them. It's quite a drag when the rosy red upper side of an apple on the ground has been half eaten underneath. Yuck.

There's the problem of having too much. I once grew squash so successfully that I had a couple of bushel baskets full of them stored in the crawlspace, to eat all through winter. I make an excellent roasted squash soup. But I was so sick of squash by the time I had picked and stored it all, that I never ate any more of it. The squashes rotted away into dust.

Same thing with rhubarb. In spring, I clean, chop and store rhubarb in plastic bags in the freezer. Home-grown rhubarb crumble for Christmas Eve! Think of it! Only by the time next spring arrives and new rhubarb starts growing, I still have all the old rhubarb in the freezer. What is wrong with me?

When is Frost?

My biggest problem of all is not knowing when to call it a year. I do know when to bring my houseplants back inside, which have had a lovely summer vacation on my large verandah. When the forecast calls for possible frost, they get moved back inside for winter. But when should I put away the patio umbrella, the folding chairs? When do

I secure my outdoor garden ornaments? When to put away the tools and watering cans? When is it time for a last cleanout of the gutters? If I wait until every last leaf has fallen from the trees, I can get in trouble. We've had early winter storms that leave ice on the ground and make using a ladder unpleasant, not to say dangerous. Usually, my metal patio table and even the wheelbarrows get frozen in place until spring. I'm a mess; I admit it.

You can't go by the calendar. Thanksgiving weekend is a traditional time to wrap up a yard. But then we can have a gorgeous Indian Summer of long, warm, golden days when I have another chance to do the gardening work I didn't get to before, or more likely, just to be outside, reading, enjoying the sunshine, storing memories of good times for the winter.

Fortunately, the rest of my property doesn't need to be prepared for winter. The benches stay where they are for use through the winter, and there is nothing to protect or bring in. Except the winter firewood. This year, thanks to all the wood that had to be cleaned up from the 2013 ice storm, the woodpile is nicely stocked. We had so much wood that we didn't use all of it last winter. There are still piles of dead branches to cut up for future firewood, if they don't rot first. Other than making the pile neat and convenient to the side door, and covering it with tarps against rain and snow, we're good for firewood. Except when are those winter storms going to start?

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