SEASONAL PLANTING NOTES

CALENDAR OF WORK FOR OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER

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THE month of October brings us to the north-east rainy period which extends over the whole Island. During this period planting and transplanting of all varieties of material can be undertaken from the small seedling to quite fair-sized shrubs.

It is not always the actual amount of rain we get that matters so much for the transplanting as the fact that atmospheric conditions change from the pre-monsoon periods. The temperature drops considerably and conditions become moist and saturated so that the plants are liable to get a quick recovery from the jolt in shifting from pots or beds to a permanent position.

In the drier parts of the Island the October conditions begin the chief and often the only season for cultivation, and most vegetables can be given a start at this period. Tobacco seed should be sown for later planting, and cotton sowings are now done. Flower garden subjects should now be put in and hedges renewed where either seed or cuttings are necessitated for the purpose. Cannas planted now should flower at the end of November and remain so till the end of the north-east, *i.e.*, April-May next. Fruit trees too, whether imported, bought locally or raised on the spot, should go in this month to reap the full benefit of the subsequent rainy months of November and December. Too much importance cannot be given to this point, whether in wet or dry zone, as so often this planting or transplanting is delayed, often till the end of December, with the result that the newly planted subject gets insufficient time to establish itself and get its roots moving in the soil before unfavourable conditions assert themselves once again. Always be prompt in utilizing favourable weather where planting or transplanting is concerned.

Up-country, the same principle applies, but with slight modifications as the larger percentage of plantings here comprise seedlings of annuals which have been sown in beds or boxes

in September and later pricked out in beds to harden off. Those tender and of a succulent nature in the seedling should be given some overhead protection after planting to ward off any ill-effect of heavy downpours of rain, and the same applies to vegetables of a succulent nature such as lettuce and Cruciferae vegetables which will further need protection against cut-worm attacks also. Mildew or damping off is a frequent cause of loss in young seedlings of flowers and vegetables and a precautionary dusting every 3 or 4 days with flowers of sulphur saves many young seedlings. For pot work, geraniums, pelargoniums, gloxinia, and cinerarias make a good show and these should now be potted and grown on, increasing the size of the pot at each time of potting.

In low-country gardens of the wet south-west areas, operations cover a wide range. All general planting should be made and completed this month. Pruning and thinning out of shrubs and trees should now be attended to and new selections, indicated in the list last month, should be utilized. In the vegetable garden this is an excellent month for sowings or resowings of peas, beans, beet carrot, brinjal, knol-khol (or Khol-rabi) artichokes and the like. Tomatoes, which prefer drier conditions both for early growth and for fruiting can be left till next month, or even December.

A popular garden subject now grown with enthusiasm all over the Island is the "Shoeflower" (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), because of the advent of new and striking varieties to Peradeniya a few years back. In Hawaii, where this plant grows to perfection, horticultural authorities have given much attention to raising new forms and these at the moment number over 500 in various colours and forms.

A couple of dozen of the best forms Hawaii has produced were obtained a few years ago and budded on to the common shoeflower hedge-plant at Peradeniya. The procedure, *i.e.*, budding, is very successful, but it takes six full months to produce a good budded plant. Now stocks of these new varieties have increased; the paucity of budwood, which was a retarding factor in getting these new varieties circulated in the Island is to some extent overcome. Anyone may now raise his own budded plants given the patience and technique, since budwood in fair quantity is available at Peradeniya should the grower not already have obtained plants earlier from here and grown his or her own requirements in this respect. The operation is not too difficult.

Normal cuttings of matured wood from the common hedge hibiscus and about the thickness of a lead pencil or a little more are used as rootstock. Sections of 9 in. to 10 in. in length are used and inserted in well-prepared beds to which a liberal

addition of sand is given. About 3 in. of the cutting goes in the soil and at an angle slightly varying from the vertical, and 6 in. to 7 in. left above surface of the bed. These cuttings form roots rapidly, make ready growth, and at 3 months from insertion are ready for budding.

The budding methods employed are the inverted tee as for citrus or the rectangular patch as for rubber, both being equally successful once the art of budding is attained. Cleft and side grafting is also very successful and a certain amount of time is gained by this mode of grafting but it is not recommended where budwood supplies are scanty. All operations of budding and grafting are explained and illustrated in leaflet No. 77 available from the Department of Agriculture, Peradeniya, at 10 cents per copy.

Growth above the union of bud to rootstock should be gradually reduced as the new bud shoots out and at the end of 6 months from insertion of cutting and 3 months from budding, the budded plant is fit for transfer to permanent quarters. At Peradeniya, to overcome transport difficulties, it is necessary to establish the plant in a bamboo pot, and this is done either by striking the cutting in the pot direct or lifting from the bed after a month to 5 weeks from insertion and one month or so before budding.

Colours range from light pink to deep carmine, and to those not acquainted with the fact reference can be made to a descriptive bulletin on those plants with coloured plates illustrating 16 of the best varieties, now available at Peradeniya. Certain crosses between these new varieties have been made and some very fine results attained and these will become available for distribution shortly.

Those anticipating opening up or extending their fruit areas should have all preparation completed and plants put in by the end of this month. The main fruits would consist of citrus, mango, jak, pineapple, papaw and plantains but useful fruit to establish in the orchard also include mangosteen, durian, rambutan, sapodilla, soursop, custard apple, avocado pear, guava, Brazil cherry, loquat and Ceylon gooseberry. Up-country a selection should include tree-tomato, cherrimoyer, China guava, persimmon, passion fruit, strawberry, Cape gooseberry, mountain papaw, peach, fig and the red-heart and golden-drop plum. Literature is available on planting distances and general care, with selection of varieties of all these fruits, if application is made to Peradeniya.

Birds, though destructive in the fruiting season of soft fruits, are on the whole of considerable benefit to the gardener. Certain species are of direct benefit in that they destroy caterpillars, grubs, borers and the like, and it is wise to cater for

bird life to some extent to reduce depredations on fruit trees proper. The planting here and there in spare spaces of such trees as the wild guava and species of Ficus or wild fig, assists in this respect. Of particular merit, however, is a very valuable fruit and foliage tree fairly recently introduced and now becoming common, and known as the Jam fruit tree (*Muntingea calabura*).

This tree is recommended as a boundary to any garden, orchard or small fruit plot in that its growth is remarkably rapid, it has a full umbrella habit of growth, is most ornamental and is continually in flower and fruit. It is a small to medium size tree, of shallow and small root system, will grow in wet and dry zones, and its fruit is useful to man and bird. The berries are useful for tarts and also for jams but the primary use of the trees would be, of course, for birds.

November might be considered the month for garden consolidation. Weather is usually wet and cool. If not already done, all planting operations should be completed this month. Any gaps or sick plants in last month's planting out should be replaced early, the soil kept stirred up and friable and all incentive possible to free growth given to all plants in beds and borders.

Much can be done in laying out or renewal of lawn areas along this time of the year. Numerous requests are received periodically on this subject and the methods to employ in making or maintaining a good lawn might well be dealt with now.

Dealing first with lawn making, the first essential is that the area to be treated should be properly prepared by thoroughly digging, removal of coarse stones, roots and other impedimenta and the surface uniformly levelled and rolled smooth. Drainage is very essential or sourness and tufty coarse grass is the result eventually. In very light and sandy soils the turf is liable also to become patchy, in dry weather. Where soil is heavy, therefore, a good layer of sand or sandy soil is required for incorporation in the top layer of the proposed lawn area; where soil is light some form of manures such as cattle manure leaf-mould and the like with a layer of soil of fairly heavy clayey texture forked in the surface or spread on a layer.

Lawn raising from seed is not recommended under our extreme conditions except for elevations of some height where conditions are cool and uniformly moist. In mid and low country the soil after seed planting has to be frequently watered or the delicate seed is soon burned up. The soil, being necessarily of fine texture for such work, is liable by reason of these frequent waterings to cake and a hard pan formed which

injures germination tremendously, and weed growth too is troublesome to control in such areas. Some seed will come through, of course, but a percentage only sufficient to produce a very thin and poor cover.

A common method here is to cut large sods roughly 8 in. to 10 in. in diameter with a spade or mammoty from some close-cropped pasture land or other, and plant in the new area a foot or so apart. It is not too satisfactory, however, and by far the best method is turf dibbling. Large areas can by this method be dealt with very economically, and it is easier to obtain and increase the one or two types of grass particularly desired and considered best for the locality. By this method small root sections of selected grass are dibbled in at distances of 4 in. to 6 in. apart over the prepared area. As the area is dibbled the surface soil should be levelled out to leave a smooth surface. Subsequent care involves periodical weeding and as the grass roots grow these should first be cut with a pair of garden shears and not by the mower. Light rollings now and again help matters and after 8 to 10 weeks from planting the mowing machine can be put on for the initial mow. In 3 months or a little later, according to favourable weather conditions or otherwise, a very fine sward or turf can be formed.

Good types of grass for lawns in general are the Bermuda grass (*Cynodon dactylon*) known also in India as the "Doob", the "Carpet grass" of America (*Axonopis compressus*) and our local "Blue grass" (*Panicum longiflorum*). There are others such as *Paspalum sanguinale*, the clover like perennial (*Desmodium triflorum*), and the local *Tuttiri* or "Love grass" which resists, drought well, forms excellent turfs in the moist low country and semi-dry areas in spite of the objection when allowed to seed of its sharp-hooked spines.

Existing lawns needing renovation can be improved by means of a top dressing of well-decayed cattle manure broken up small or sifted, and mixed well with earth of good humus content, some bone dust and a proportion of sand. The best way to apply is to thrust a 4-pronged garden fork vertically into the turf and work to and fro leaving holes or cavities roughly the diameter of the prongs and 3 to 4 inches deep. The holes are made at 3 to 4 inches apart over the whole surface after which the dressing is carefully spread over the surface and raked in. By watering, or in the first rains, the surface sifted soil is washed into all the crevices, the dressing thereby penetrating down to the roots of the grasses, rather than acting merely as a surface dressing. One cart load of sifted dressing should suffice for 3 squares of land, *i.e.*, 300 square feet in area. Regular mowing and rolling are essentials of a good lawn area and the amazing fine swards of turf to be seen in old-established

gardens in Europe are a source of envy to the resident in the tropics. The lawns in such gardens can well be termed the true focus of the picture.

Such are not acquired however by mere mowing and rolling. Nitrogen and phosphates are a requisite of the really good lawn and if we take away the store of nitrogen and phosphorus in the mowings and put nothing back, the soil soon becomes impoverished whereby weed growth which thrives on a lower level of subsistence will oust the lawn grasses.

Occasional dressings as mentioned above are very necessary but where organic manure is difficult to obtain inorganics in the form of superphosphates and nitrate of soda very materially help in lawn maintenance. Dressings of such a mixture should be given at roughly 4 ounces to the square yard .

Lime is very essential to most lawns though not generally recognized, and dressings should occasionally be given, preferably before the monsoon rains set in. Half a pound per square yard, which works out at roughly 2 tons per acre, is a satisfactory dressing and should be applied every 2 or 3 years.

This liming function is not given the prominence it deserves in gardening operations, especially as Ceylon soils are normally deficient in lime. Lime in some form is necessary in all garden soils and may be said to be the base of all fertility. No matter how rich a soil may be in other constituents, unless lime is also present it is impossible to grow good produce.

Many vegetable gardens Up-country are limed periodically, but this attention is seldom given to other parts of the garden or to Low-country gardens in general. Except where plants which resent lime are grown, and these are very few indeed, all gardens should be dressed with lime at least once every 4 years. For normal purposes 6 to 8 ounces per square yard is a good average quantity of lime to apply, the heavier soils requiring the heavier dressing.

On very light soils lime is best applied in the form of chalk, as ordinary lime is apt to destroy the small quantity of humus present, from 1 to 2 pounds per square yard being necessary. Lime in addition to making the soil more fertile checks the ravages of insect pests and encourages the development of the useful soil bacteria.

If not already attended to, pruning and thinning out of shrubs, trees and such like should now be completed. Dahlias Up-country should now have finished flowering and the bulbs can be lifted about two weeks after cutting down the plants, and stored in a dry shed for planting at the end of December.