

Bringing salvation to untamed wilderness

Clearing pathways now will give garden a bright new look in spring

BY HELEN CHESNUT, TIMES COLONIST OCTOBER 15, 2009

Once a garden reaches a certain age, there's no avoiding serious sessions of John the Baptist-style gardening. That's the hard, unglamorous work of clearing straight paths and making rough ways smooth.

This autumn, an urgent inner voice has called me to begin clearing pathways in the wilderness areas of the garden. The process, so far, has been immensely satisfying.

One side area of the back garden in particular was ripe for redemption. Blessed neighbours had taken out a series of huge forest trees, lifting the shade from this part of my garden and eliminating the grip on the soil of rapacious tree roots. With sunshine and replenished soil, new beginnings became possible.

I began by cleaning and reshaping the path along the side fence, doubling its width and covering the new pathway with a thick, weed-suppressing layer of wood shavings. I re-edged the abbreviated bed with large rocks, dug roots out and seeded buckwheat, which grew quickly and has now been dug under. Soon it will be topped up for the winter with compost.

Next on the agenda is to make the bed even slightly smaller by widening the pathway on its opposite end, to make a more spacious route into a wooded clearing past large and vigorous lacecap and oakleaf hydrangeas.

More recently, an area beside the garden shed, which became a mass of tangled, tumbling climbing hydrangea and ivy in last winter's snows, has been completely renovated. Almost all the ivy has gone, the hydrangea vines are cut back to framework branches, and two paths have been created, cleaned, and topped with shavings. One path leads beside the shed to the wooded clearing. The other goes past the oakleaf hydrangea to the newly rehabilitated side garden.

If late fall and winter brings substantial amounts of usable outdoor weather, the garden should have a bright new, smoothed and straightened look by spring.

Zinnias revisited. This past spring, in a small section of the flower bed stretching the length of the front fence, I decided to test the endurance of zinnias in less than opulent soil conditions. To prepare the soil I dug out some of the roots from neighbouring trees and dug in a generous layer of compost.

At the back, near the fence, I transplanted Benary's giant purple zinnias. William Dam Seeds lists separate colours in this zinnia series, and I had admired the purple flowers at my local farmers' market last summer. They are a rich, rosy purple with fancy gold centres, on strong, healthy, 75-cm (30-inch)

plants that are heat- and drought-tolerant.

To edge the zinnia segment of the bed I used Thumbelina, a 20-cm (eight-inch) mixture of perfect little yellow, white, scarlet, orange, and pink flowers on bushy plants that bloomed for months and continue looking good still.

Behind Thumbelina I transplanted a patch of Zahara Starlight Rose, a new, All-America Selections award winning zinnia that will be introduced in 2010 seed catalogues.

Strong and bushy at 30 cm (12 inches) tall and wide, these zinnia plants have been covered since late June in exquisite blooms featuring pristine white petals marked towards the centre in deep rose around a gold button centre.

I had forgotten how care-free zinnias could be. All my plants were supremely easy to grow from seedlinghood through months of bloom.

GARDEN EVENTS

Native plant sale. Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, 3873 Swan Lake Rd., is holding a Fall Native Plant Sale this Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The more than 75 species of plants will include shrubs, ferns, and ground covers. The sale will also feature displays on gardening with native plants and creating wildlife habitat in urban settings. Admission for members is free, others \$2. A complete list of plants for sale is available at www.swanlake.bc.ca.

Mushroom ramble. Glendale Gardens, 505 Quayle Rd. in Saanich, is presenting The Mushroom Ramble on Saturday, Oct. 24, from 2 to 4 p.m., in the woodland beyond the gardens. A forest soils ecologist will explain how fungi help forests work and identify mushrooms along the way. For more information or to register call 250-479-6162. www.hcp.bc.ca.

Zen & Now. Artist and garden designer Robin Harper will present a slide lecture tracing the development of Japanese gardens, Sunday, Oct. 25 from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. Following the presentation participants may choose to have lunch in the tearoom and enjoy a guided tour of Robin's Japanese garden in Metchosin.

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist