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What's Up with All These Squirrels and Other Fall Tidbits

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Anyone driving these days can't help but notice an abundance of squirrels scampering across the roads. Last year's bumper crop of acorns, pinecones and other seeds prompted Northeast squirrel populations to soar. The hungry critters are scurrying about searching for food. Their preferred food sources are not as abundant as last year so the furry creatures have taken to raiding gardens and farms. Farmers and orchardists in New Hampshire and Maine have been complaining about squirrel damage to fruits, pumpkins and corn crops this year. There is not much we can do about the large number of squirrels so just enjoy their antics and watch out for them when driving.

About now, most of our containers that we potted up last spring and so carefully tended through the hot and wet summer are starting to look pretty ragged. Time to swap out the leggy petunias and yellowing nasturtiums for mums, asters, flowering kales, grasses and other fall fanfare. Remove the tired plants along with their root ball and slip in the new ones. Add more potting mix if necessary and fertilize every other week with a water-soluble plant food. Warm bright colors make fall containers shine.

Many vegetable gardeners are still picking peppers as they slowly turn red. While immature green peppers are totally edible, sweet mature red, orange or yellow ones are surely worth the wait. Peppers mature and color up with time and sun. Some pepper cultivars mature quicker than others. This year I am growing 'Buran', a Polish heirloom, and 'Red Belgium'. 'Red Belgium' matures in 50 to 70 days from transplanting so we have been enjoying the 3 to 4-inch, wedge-shaped fruit since early August. The peppers turn from green to yellow to red and are most sweet at the red stage. Each plant, like promised, produced about 20 peppers. They are a bit small to stuff, however, but perfect for salads.

'Buran' fruits are still green and that would be expected since it matures 90 days after transplanting. Right now, the plants are heavily laden with green peppers and we'll just let them ripen on the plant unless a frost threatens or the squirrels start eating them.



Temperatures will also be a factor for winter squash harvest. Both pumpkins and winter squash are chilling sensitive. What this means is that when temperatures drop below 50° F, they may be subjected to cold injury. Apparently, the chilling injury is cumulative meaning that the more time the fruits are subjective to low temperatures, the more they may be injured. Chilling injury may not be readily visible on squash or pumpkins. Often it shows up when fruits are warmed and then as sunken pits on the skins. Fruits can succumb to decay rapidly.

When the forecast calls for temperatures below 50° F, pick your winter squash and pumpkins. Wipe them clean of soil and set them somewhere with temperatures that will remain between 68 and 77° F to cure for a week or two. Then store them in a cooler 52–61° F location with 60 percent relative humidity. Always use damaged fruit first.

A lot of gardeners, including myself, try to get as much of the yard and gardens cleaned up in the fall reasoning that there will be a little less to do during the busy spring season. Entomologists beg to differ. They are noticing that many insect pollinator populations are dwindling and blaming it in part on habitat loss.

They suggest leaving leaf litter in place until spring as it can shelter beneficial larvae, egg masses and hibernating wild bees. Also, leave as many flower, grass and raspberry canes standing as possible because cavity nesters may have made their winter homes in the stems. Do clean up diseased plants and remove as many weeds as you can. Patches of bare soil may hold overwintering wild bee species. Leave these alone. Neat freaks may want to tidy up the front yard but perhaps can be convinced to let the back yard be until spring. The native pollinators will thank you.

If you have not started a compost pile in the past, now is a great time to do so. Creating a compost pile is not only a great way to turn garden and food wastes into a nutrient-rich soil amendment but it also reduces the amount of organic wastes going to landfills or incineration plants. Check out some composting fact sheets at www.soiltest.uconn.edu or sign up for UConn's Master Composter program to be held next month at the Tolland Agricultural Center in Vernon at www.ladybug.uconn.edu.

For more information on the above topics or on any other home or garden topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit their web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.