It’s Time to Garden!
By Laura Murphy, Lake Havasu Area Master Gardener

October is one of my favorite months here in Lake Havasu City to be a gardener. It is the start of some of our best weather. With the extreme hot weather behind us, we have the energy and desire to get outside and do some work. The cold weather will not arrive for some time making this a perfect time of year.

Look around your landscape and see what plants made it through the summer heat. The cooler weather encourages these plants to grow again. Our drought continues and once again we had an extremely dry summer this year and many plants suffered. If you have plants that did not make it, try and determine why. The little bit of investigative work you spend will pay for itself with a better looking garden and healthier plants.

As the weather continues to cool your plants need less water. This should be a gradual process. Don’t decrease the time of each watering; you still need the same amount of water to penetrate the root zone to the proper depth. Start increasing the intervals between your irrigation. For example, if you have been watering every other day, you will want to decrease to every third day. If you have been watering twice a week, drop to once a week etc.

It is especially important to fertilize your citrus now. Follow the guidelines for recommended dosage and apply 1/3 the yearly amount. The other months to fertilize citrus in the Lake Havasu City area are February and April. Fertilize other flowering plants and shrubs as well. Do this early in the month rather than later. We do not want to encourage a lot of new growth later that may be damaged by cold weather.

October is not the best month to do heavy pruning. Hedges can be lightly sheared to thicken them up. Only trim other trees and shrubs when necessary. This means check for what are called the three D’s: diseased, damaged and dead or dying. Trim these out but leave the heavy pruning for another month or so.

If you have container plants that have been lurking in the shade to protect them, move them out into more sunshine. Plants in containers that are not moved around can become leggy. While black plastic pots are not recommended to use as containers in the summer, they are great for winter gardening. The black will absorb more heat from the winter sun, keeping the soil around the roots warmer.
It’s time to pull out the remains of summer flowers and put in cool season varieties. Rotate flowers from year to year. Planting the same variety in the same place year after year will only lead to trouble. This is called continuous cropping. Our native desert soils are typically free from harmful bacteria and fungi. When we continually plant the same things in the same place, pests and diseases will build up. Once established, soil diseases are very hard to get rid of. It is far better to prevent problems in the first place.

Give newly transplanted plants plenty of moisture while their roots are getting established. It is best not to sprinkle flowering plants when watering. This can lead to fungal infections. Use bubbler or drip to deliver the water to the soil and keep the leaves dry. This is an excellent practice for all plants all the time, but it is much more important when the weather is cooler.

If you have a Bermuda grass lawn and want to over-seed with rye, October is the month for it. The best way to determine the most optimum time is to check soil temperature. If you over-seed when it is still too hot, the seeds will fail to germinate. If you wait until it is too cold, the germination rate will be slow and the Bermuda will already be turning brown as it goes dormant. You can purchase a soil thermometer at most nurseries and garden supply centers. When the soil temperature reaches 72 degrees, 2 inches deep the proper time has arrived.

Now is the time to plant spring flowering bulbs and wildflowers. For bulbs, do not follow traditional bulb planting depths. If you do you will be disappointed. When planted at traditional depths, they will emerge just when our hot weather hits and the blooms will not last. If you plant them at one half the traditional depth, they will emerge earlier when our weather is still cool. The best time to have your bulbs begin flowering here is March.

For wildflowers, scatter seeds in sunny areas. Plant less than 1 inch deep and sprinkle the area daily until the seedlings emerge. You may want to cover them with wire to keep out birds and rabbits. Extend the time between watering as the seedlings grow.

Most trees and shrubs can be planted now. Our weather will remain warm enough to allow some root growth before cooler temperatures arrive. If you miss planting this month, it will be better to wait until next year when the temperatures are on the up-swing. This is especially true of citrus, palms and hibiscus that need the warmer soil temperatures to generate good root growth.

If you have not planted your vegetable garden yet, get going. Plant cool season crops such as beets, broccoli, carrots, chard, kale, lettuce, onions, parsley, peas and radishes. If you do not have a proper vegetable garden, you can easily plant in containers. They are easier to take care of and can be moved to different locations to take advantage of the sunlight. Remember to protect from rabbits and birds.

Many pests are more active again in October. Watch for aphids, cutworms and grasshoppers. Harvester ants can be a problem as they work to prepare for winter. Birds and rabbits are not a new
problem but any new planting needs to be protected from them. Chicken wire will keep out rabbits but even the small 1 inch size openings can allow in small birds and ground squirrels.

After a long hot summer, our cooler weather is a welcome relief. This is our gardening season, so get out and enjoy it. As the National weather service talks about freezing temperatures and winter weather around the country, we can smile and be glad we live in Lake Havasu City.

Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu city Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105 or visit us at Home Garden Day from 11am to 1pm the first Tuesday of every month at the Library.