

In My Garden, October

"There is a harmony in autumn, and a lustre in the sky, which through the summer is not heard or seen, as if it could not be, as if it had not been."

Percy Bysshe Shelley

The garden starts winding down in October but not without a final swansong of coloured berries and leaves. It is the month of fruits and seeds, the last cherished warm sunny days and a few late flowers too.

Hedgerows are magical this month; bracken and grasses ripe with seeds turn to wonderful golds and russets competing with the leaves as they begin changing. Far less subtle are all the different fruits now ripened and sparkling as if the hedges themselves have been sprinkled with precious jewels; elder and blackberries shining like Whitby jet, haws and rosehips like garnets and rubies, sloes with their deepest midnight purple and grey bloom like mysterious black pearls, bryony berries like strings of fire opals whilst vivid pink and orange spindle berries are the rarest of exotic corals, it's just Mother Nature showing off her bling.

Sorbus pratii, a mountain ash from China, has very attractive white fruits spotted pink like a robin's egg. Nearby *Cornus alba*, a dogwood, is often grown for its red-barked winter stems but in October is blazing with yellows, plumy reds and oranges. And like the *Sorbus* it also bears bunches of white fruits from which it gets its Latin name "alba". In the same row of shrubs separating me from my neighbour is our native dogwood, *Cornus sanguinea*. Its berries are black and its autumnal colours deep reds and purples. One of the components of the famous New England fall is *Aronia*, the red chokeberry. It fires off its leaves a few at a time as they suddenly become an intense scarlet. Its berries are like tiny red apples with a bitter but not wholly unpleasant taste. They are reputedly highly nutritious with greater levels of anti-oxidants than almost any other fruits. *Euonymus alatus*, a spindle, has rather insignificant fruits compared to other members of its tribe, but more than makes up for this by the brightness of its shrimp pink and vermilion leaves. Above these all grows the common old stag's horn sumac *Rhus typhina*. This erupts into the brightest reds, yellows and oranges, dominating the whole garden with an array of splendour to rival any smart and expensive Japanese maple.

Naked ladies are always a pleasure in the garden, especially when they are the flowers of *Colchicum speciosum* – often called an autumn crocus though it is actually a member of the lily family. I grow the variety "Rubrum", which has darker pink flowers and sturdier, more robust stems. Only the flowers appear in the autumn. The lush wide leaves grow in the spring. Just below them are some late-flowering michaelmas daisies with soft, pale blue flowers that attract a wide range of hoverflies and bees. Another plant that also attracts lots of insects is *heptacodium jasminoides*. This shrub grows about 6 foot tall and as much wide in my garden. At this time of year it is covered in sprays of white jasmine-shaped and scented flowers. A rather drab clump of brownish green leaves suddenly bursts with beautiful sprays of pure white flowers. The flowers of *Saxifraga fortunei* are delicate and very sensitive to frost which alas destroys them most years, but they are so beautiful, especially viewed close up with a hand lens, that they are still well worth growing however fleeting the display may be. The late flowers attract the last of the late butterflies – Commas, Red Admirals, Tortoise Shells, Brimstones and a bowl full of windfall apples gives them an extra treat. They are all stocking up on nectar before hibernating until the spring.

And there is no need to ask you what October is like where you are, October is simply beautiful wherever you live.