
The Dirt: September Gardening Resources & Tips

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Gardening Resources & Tips from the MMGA

September 2025 Seasons Change...



September means apples, grapes, cranberries, farmer's markets, tilling fields, cutting back perennials, planting new perennials, cleaning the garden, canning, and of course drinking deeply of those warm days as they drift by. For many critters, it's time to gather food for winter or fuel for migration (think of the monarch's long journey home). For native plants, September offers Joe Pye, goldenrod, milkweed, and asters, all at once, wild in the fields. Perfect weather and outdoor activity make September in Massachusetts one of the favorite months of the year. In this issue, we feature native grasses, a new food pantry garden, and tips for September chores. Enjoy!



In this month's issue of the Dirt...

- Featured Garden: Discover a new and busy MMGA food pantry garden.
- Featured How-To: Learn to choose the best native grasses for you.
- Monthly Tip: Use September wisely and you will be happy next spring!
- Monthly Plant: This spectacular native grass is a favorite of many!



Master Gardener Certification Program

MMGA Certification Program Announcement!

- **The application for the 2026 Master Gardener Certification Program will be available in *The Dirt* on October 1, 2025.**
- **Our new *information sessions* on the program will be found on the MMGA website mid-September. Visit these to learn more!**

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Massachusetts Master
Gardener Association Presents

Winter Gardening Know-How

Topics Include

- Winter Pruning: Why, When, and How to Prune your Shrubs
- What's Wrong with My House Plant?
- Humans and Their Use of Plants
- Inviting Wildlife into Your Garden

Join us ONLINE

Nov 5, 12, 19 & Dec 3 2025 7-8:30 PM

Registration closes November 2, 2025

To learn more and sign up, click to visit
our website. Questions? Email us at
KnowHow@MassMasterGardeners.org

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Featured Monthly Garden
Marshfield Food Pantry Garden

PO Box 1097
Marshfield, MA 02050



Author Cecilia Delgadillo is a Certified Master Gardener who was certified in 1990 via the Penn State Extension Master Gardener Program. She has set up approximately 40 community gardens in schools and nursing homes and beautified 4 highway exits. Luckily for us, she moved to Massachusetts and joined the Massachusetts Master Gardener Association in 2021.

The Marshfield Food Pantry Garden is a nascent Master Gardener outreach site. It all started when I visited the food pantry to donate extra produce I harvested from my garden. The executive director, Jim Hewitt (who recently retired) appreciated the organic produce and we started discussing a way of supplying the pantry with more fresh, organic produce. A few weeks later, I applied for a \$2,500 grant from Lowe's in Pembroke to build 5 cedar raised beds in the food pantry parking lot. We got the grant— and a flatbed truck delivered the lumber, soil, and everything we needed including tools and SPF hats! The employees from Lowe's built all the beds. The local Scout troop assisted in the planting, while local media and the Select Board joined in. We were off and running!



Even better - In the future, we plan on building more raised beds at the food pantry. I've spoken to Lowe's to see if we could be eligible for another grant in the future to expand and I was told, absolutely yes!

Another facet of the Food Pantry Garden is the seed library at the Ventress Memorial Library which houses the food pantry. When I originally approached the library about starting a seed library, I was told no due to a lack of money, time, and volunteers. However, after a large donation of seeds from Lowe's, I got a resounding, "YES, please!" from the library— not only to start a seed library, but also to improve the library grounds. When I strolled the grounds with the head librarian, she was excited at the possibility of making the library gardens nice. We can't wait to begin these beautification projects that will benefit both the library and food pantry patrons.



The seed library is a great project for master gardeners— especially those who have a difficult time working in the gardens can still satisfy the urge to garden and serve the community by sorting seeds and writing up instructions. This will hopefully also become the backbone for some much needed workshops for both library patrons and the food pantry staff and customers. This will also be a good resource for badge-earning Scouts.



This project has been like working with a ball of clay. We had a vision, but it keeps changing and getting better and is starting to become a beautiful work of functional art. You should see the faces of the volunteers and clients when I walk through the back door with baskets full of fresh basil, thyme, string beans, and cucumbers. I'm thankful to Lowe's, local volunteers, and the Scouts for all their help in getting this project off the ground. When Master Gardeners begin working at this site, they will bring this project to the next level!



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the ground. When Master Gardeners begin working at this site, they will bring this project to the next level!

Featured How-To ***How to Choose a Native Grass***

Author & Senior Principal Master Gardener Denise Guérin graduated with the Class of 2022. She volunteers regularly at Wakefield Arboretum, the Shirley-Eustis House, and the Medford Food Pantry Garden. She is also the co-Project Manager at the Ohrenberger School Pollinator Garden and is a member of the Speakers Bureau. At home in West Roxbury, her yard includes a vegetable garden, a native plant pollinator garden, a patch of "urban meadow" and plenty of places for her terrier mix to join her in playing in the dirt.

*Sedges have edges,
Rushes are round,
And Grasses have nodes
That go down to the ground*

As a kid, I was pretty sure that I had mastered all that was important to know about grass once I had memorized this rhyme. Turns out, it might be a little bit more complicated than I had imagined!

All grasses are members of the grass (Poaceae) family. (By the way, neither rushes nor sedges are members of Poaceae.) Grasses are characterized by having small, usually inconspicuous flowers and narrow leaves with parallel veins. Their stems are round and generally hollow except where leaves attach; those areas are the nodes. Nodes typically have visible bulges, called joints.

Because of their limited inflorescence, grasses aren't an attraction for most insects or other animal pollinators. This means they are primarily dependent on wind for cross-pollination. As a result of the random nature of this pollination

process, grasses produce huge amounts of pollen that can cover long distances... to the chagrin of those of us with allergies!

Despite their generally weak showing as pollinator attracting plants, native grasses are excellent larval host plants. For example, most of the 100+ types of skipper butterflies prefer grasses as host plants for their eggs; several of those grasses will be detailed later in this article. Beyond acting as larval food pantries, native grasses also provide seasonal shelter, camouflage from predators, and sought after nesting sites. Grasses are also a powerhouse of the world economy, and together comprise a huge food crop on which we all (animals and humans) rely for survival: wheat, rice, corn, oats, rye, and barley are just a few of the most familiar.

But these are not the subject of this article. Instead, we will be looking at a few of the grasses that are native to New England. All of these were also originally native to an area much larger than New England, and were to be found in the Eastern Tall Grass Prairie that arose in what is today Indiana, Iowa, and states further west. The Tall Grass Prairie was substantially plowed up throughout the 19th century, although remnants are still to be found. But these grasses have also survived in much diminished patches in most of New England, and have seen a resurgence thanks to renewed interest in growing native plants.



In addition to lack of suitability as host plants, most non-native grasses differ from our native grasses in a very significant way, easily visible to the observer. Do you remember the last time you saw a native plant meadow? It may have been in a park or public garden, or perhaps you're fortunate enough to have one of your own at home. These are landscapes of native grasses interspersed with a variety of seasonal herbaceous perennials of all types.

In contrast, areas dominated by European grass species are usually lacking in any herbaceous perennials. Think of your lawn! Sure, you mow it, but even if you stopped mowing your lawn today, you would not be gifted with an area full of colorful blooms next year. A common example of a popular "lawn" grass is the European import

erroneously named Kentucky blue grass (*Poa pratensis*). If you were to stop mowing that grass and let it grow to its natural height of two to three feet, you would simply have an area of tall Kentucky blue grass, and not a meadow.



Kentucky Bluegrass

The explanation for this is that native grasses are almost entirely clumping grasses. They may appear to form a solid mass upon first glance, but when looking more closely we can see that all the many individual stems pop up from a central root system. In contrast, the European species that make up most lawns are rhizomatous; they grow and spread as a continuous carpet of turf, elbowing out most everything but other non-native "weeds." Meanwhile in native meadows, native flowering perennials take advantage of the space and growing room and support naturally provided by native grasses.

Following is a short list of a few of my favorite native grasses. I won't make any bad jokes about how difficult it was to weed this list down to a half-dozen grasses...I would never do that...but there are literally hundreds to choose from for your own garden enjoyment!

Eastern bottle-brush (*Eleocharis acicularis*)

I love the spiky bottle-brush look that is surprisingly soft and silky to the touch. It has the potential to grow up to 5 feet in height. This grass enjoys dappled to full shade, and is often utilized for naturalizing wooded edges. It is also a good and popular grass for erosion control along shady or partially shady banks. Eastern bottle-brush is a host plant for the Northern pearly-eye butterfly.



Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

No doubt about it, Little Bluestem is the rock star of this list! Massachusetts horticulturalist Dan Jaffe Wilder said, “Most horticulturalists agree that Little Bluestem is one of the best [grasses].” It can start off slowly for its first year or two. It is vulnerable to being misidentified as a clump of common crab grass during that period by enthusiastic lawn mowers that we might be harboring in our own homes (Yes, I DO speak from experience)! But this native grass is tough and resilient and can bounce back from a little rough treatment with aplomb; then it begins to grow into a real beauty, up to 3-4 feet in height.

Early fall foliage starts out as a silvery-blue, changing to varying shades of purple, bronze, copper, and gold as seed heads mature. In addition to bringing year-round beauty to our ornamental gardens, it holds up well in sunny, dry spots and is great for stabilizing slopes. To top it off, it is a host plant for wood nymph butterflies as well as at least a dozen different local skipper butterflies.



Purple lovegrass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*)

Growing low to the ground, typically no more than 2 feet



high, this grass is lovely in late summer and early fall when patches can form waves of hazy purple. Post-bloom, the lacy inflorescences sometimes break off and float in the wind.. This plant will bring color and texture to any garden, making it a good choice for various settings.



Sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*)

Usually growing no more than 2-3 feet in height, this grass is named for its habit of growing all of its flowers on one side of a stem. In my opinion, this grass truly deserves to be named for the beauty of its flower clusters rather than their location on a stem. The flowers appear as a silvery grey-white with very prominent rosy-red stamens.

Nowadays it is extremely rare to find anywhere in the New England wild, but it is a stunner

Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)

This is one of the very few native grasses with eye-catching flowers; these occur in clusters of green, purple, or near-black. Although it makes a lovely specimen plant in the garden, for some reason it can be difficult to source; local native plant nurseries will be your best bet. Like most native grasses, it will host a variety of skipper butterflies.



Switchgrass, a/k/a Switch panicgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)

Growing in big, leafy clumps as much as 6 feet tall, this was a dominant species on the now-defunct tall grass prairie. It has survived well in cultivation due to its disease resistance and high nutritional content. It also looks great as a specimen plant in an ornamental garden, with

that is becoming deservedly popular with home gardeners and landscapers.

its yellowing clumps of long leaves lasting through our winters. It is often used in land restorations and other large landscaping projects.

Words of Warning: A grass to avoid is the (non-native) Chinese silvergrass (*Miscanthus sinensis*) which has unfortunately become fairly popular in Massachusetts gardens. Yes, it can be lovely, but no lovelier or more striking than several of the native grasses discussed above.

Already categorized as invasive in other New England states, as of July, 2025 this grass is under consideration for listing as “invasive” by the Massachusetts Invasive Plant Advisory Group (MIPAG).



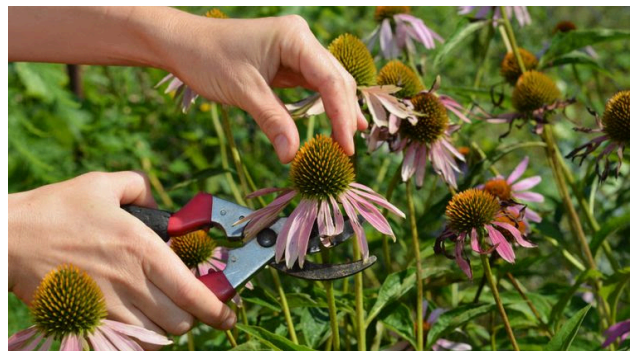
Additional recommended reading [here!](#)

Monthly Tip ***September's Seasonal Changes***

On Monday, September 22, it will officially become autumn. Light levels decrease more rapidly and there will be more hours of darkness than daylight. The weather will start to get cooler. The garden will start to go into decline but for gardeners, there is still so much to do.

In September...

Keep dead heading. This will prolong additional blooms in late flowering plants, unless you would like to keep the seed heads for birds and winter interest.



Continue to water first year plantings. The soil will be warmer than the air temperature for many weeks and root systems will continue to grow. This will help to establish the plant so it can return strong and healthy for the next year.

Do not prune trees or shrubs at this time of year; the healing process takes longer in the autumn. However, if there is disease or broken limbs or if they pose a hazard, the limbs should be removed.

Stop fertilizing plants. At this time of year new growth does not have time to mature and harden off before the cold weather sets in; the new growth has a high probability of dying.



To prevent over wintering of disease and fungus, practice good sanitation with known carriers of problems. Pick up all the leaves under roses infected with black spot. Cut back peonies, especially those infected with botrytis blight.

Both fungal diseases can overwinter in the soil and return stronger in the spring. All the infected leaves should be put in the rubbish, never placed in the compost.

In other garden areas, try to leave the leaves. Leaves (called leaf litter) left on the garden protects the soil from erosion, protects the crown of herbaceous plants in years when the temperature dips below zero, and if there is no snow cover, it allows beneficial insects to overwinter protected. Some butterfly chrysalises (Tiger Swallowtail, Black Swallowtail and Spicebush Swallowtail) overwinter at the base of their host plants and rely on leaf litter to protect them from predators and harsh winters.

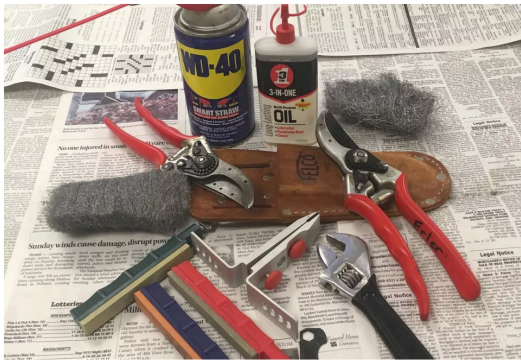
It's time to dig up and store dahlias and gladioli. In the newly vacated area, tulips can be planted and in the spring, after the tulips have gone by, they can be dug and the overwintered dahlias and gladioli can be planted. They make nice place holders for each other.



Autumn is the time to plant spring bulbs and corms. Snowdrops (*Galanthus*) and Trout Lily (*Erythronium*) need to be planted as soon as purchased. They need the moisture of the soil and to establish their root systems quickly. Bulbs like daffodils can be planted later in the autumn. As long as the ground is not frozen, most bulbs can be planted in well drained, sunny locations. And plant some garlic for next summer! Autumn is the perfect time.

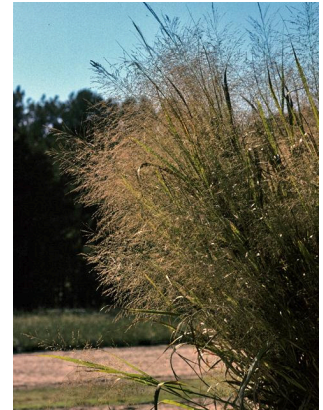
As tools are no longer being used, find some time to make sure all of the soil has been wiped off and tools are put away clean and ready to use in the spring.

As the warm weather slips away and is replaced by the cool, the garden still holds many tasks to perform and it still holds many joys. Happy Autumn!



Monthly Native Plant *Panicum virgatum*

If you were inspired by Denise's article on grasses— we have more information for you! Among native ornamental grasses, switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) stands out as one of the most versatile and garden-worthy choices. It adds a striking vertical accent, graceful movement, and fine texture to plantings while also supporting local wildlife. With a wide range of cultivars readily available in nurseries, there's a switchgrass to suit nearly every garden style, size, and color palette.



Native to prairies, pastures, roadsides, and marsh edges across much of North America, switchgrass is a warm-season, clump-forming grass with a naturally upright habit. The straight species typically grows three to six feet tall and two to three feet wide. Highly adaptable, it tolerates sun or part shade, wet or dry soils, and a variety of conditions. However, overly rich soil may cause it to flop, and too much shade will

reduce its density and form.

Switchgrass reaches its peak beauty in late summer and fall, when airy purple seed heads rise above the foliage, catching the light and adding movement to the garden. These seeds provide food for birds and mammals, and the plant also serves as a larval host for skipper butterflies, including the tawny-edge and Delaware skipper.



Gardeners have many excellent cultivars to choose from. The most popular cultivar is 'Shenandoah,' a compact cultivar with burgundy red foliage. 'Cloud Nine' is one of the tallest cultivars, growing up to seven feet tall and 'Cape Breeze' is one of the most compact, growing to only about three feet tall. 'Heavy Metal' is noted for its metallic blue foliage and strongly upright habit.

Whether planted as a specimen, in drifts, or as part of a meadow-style design, switchgrass combines beauty, resilience, and ecological value, making it a top choice for drought-tolerant landscapes.

Seasonal MMGA Learning Resources

Ask us your questions in person! Trained volunteers staff Ask-a-Master-Gardener (AAMG) tables at dozens of events throughout the growing season.

- The AAMGA is coming to a community near you, so check our [AAMG Calendar](#) for dates and times.
- Belong to a local organization that would like to host an AAMG? Contact

Outreach@MassMasterGardeners.org

Why guess? Test! Get your soil pH tested - for free!

- Visit a soil testing clinic near you: [Soil Testing Calendar](#).
- To request an MMGA Soil Testing event for your organization's event, contact SoilTesting@MassMasterGardeners.org



Year-round MMGA Learning Resources

Have a plant problem? Email our volunteers your questions...and they'll get back to you. Please include your name, phone number, and as much detail as possible, including photos.

- Massachusetts Horticultural Society at MHSHelpline@MassMasterGardeners.org
- New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill Hortline@NEBG.org

Speaker's Bureau: If you're a member of a garden club or other organization, check out our lecture topics here. If you need information on how to schedule a talk for your group, contact our Speakers Bureau Manager at Speakers@MassMasterGardeners.org.

Credits

Featured Articles & Columns

- Featured Garden: Cecilia Delgadillo, CMG
- Featured How-To: Denise Guérin, SPMG
- Monthly Gardening Tip: Kathi Gariepy, LMG
- Monthly Native Plant: Hadley Berkowitz, PMG

Photos (in order of appearance)

- Field of grass, by Lynne Larson, PMG
- Marshfield Food Pantry Garden (9 photos), by Cecilia Delgadillo, CMG
- Meadow, by Iowa State Extension
- Bluegrass lawn, by North Carolina State Extension
- Eastern bottle brush grass, by University of Maryland
- Little bluestem grass, by USDA
- Purple Love grass, by Maine Native Gardens of Blue Hill
- Prairie dropseed, by Wisconsin Univ., Wisconsin Horticulture Division of Extension
- Sideoats grama grass, by Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center Data Base
- Switchgrass, by Wisconsin Univ., Wisconsin Horticulture Division of Extension
- Invasive Chinese silver grass, by the University of Kentucky
- Deadheading echinacea, by Epic Gardening
- Cutting back Peony, by Iowa State University
- Storing dahlias, by Gardener's Path
- Cleaning tools, by University of New Hampshire
- Switchgrass, first picture, by Clemson University
- Switchgrass (three plants), by Sow Wild Natives
- Switchgrass (four seasons), by Wisconsin Univ., Wisconsin Horticulture Division of Extension
- Grass and milkweed, by Lynne Larson. PMG

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Who We Are

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is an independent non-profit organization whose mission is to share research-based horticultural knowledge and experience with the public. We meet that goal through Master Gardener Certification, outreach, education, volunteering, and public gardening programs for the advancement of best practices in sustainable, regenerative horticulture.



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