Academy Garden Club Thymes

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY GARDEN CLUB OF LENOX

OCTOBER 2026

HORTICULTURAL COLUMN

Colchicum , the Autum Crocus
and
Other Compensations

By Harriet Wetstone

How is it that the summer has come and gone, so fast? It seems like yesterday that we were getting impatient with cold, longing for summer and all the pleasures of summer warmth and garden color. But here we are, just past the fall equinox. I really love the crisp in the morning but brilliantly sunny days of this time of year.

And I am especially fond of some of the fall blooming perennials. I don't mean the usual mums and asters even though they do bring brilliant color. My favorites are Colchicum; the fall blooming, fragrant clematis; Bugbane or Cimicifuga whose foliage is present all summer but throws wonderfully fragrant fluffy white or pink spires in September; the Sweet Autumn Clematis, and of course, Stone Crop, but particularly Autumn Joy (sedum), just coming into its own in my garden now.



Colchicum

Colchicum is a corm-forming perennial. A corm is an enlarged stem, whilst a bulb consists of swollen leaf tissues. As you probably know, Colchicum throws pale green leaves early in the summer; But those leaves die back and disappear while the flowers appear now, mid-September, as a happy surprise.

The flowers, please note, are poisonous. If you touch them, make sure to wash your hands. The good part of that is that rabbits, chipmunks, and deer will avoid them.

Colchicum originated from Europe where they grow wild in more southern places. They prefer lots of sun, but cool winter temperatures, thriving in zones 5 through 9. They are best planted mid summer, weeks before they will bloom in September. You plant them right side up and layer two or three inches of good compost over them to protect and feed them as they grow.

Over time, clumps of Colchicum grow wider and wider, and you can divide them to increase their spread. Colchicums are drought resistant through the summer, but they need good watering early summer when the leaves come and then again in the fall once they are blooming.

Sweet Autumn Clematis is a non-climbing or ground clematis although it does well with some structure, else it trails on the ground. Mine grows up through an old fir tree and drapes itself over the top like fragrant white veil. It has delicate white flowers with yellow stamens and lasts through September.

After frost, I cut it down to the ground, secure that it will once again start its climb early summer. One of the concerns about growing it is that it can get huge and out of bounds, but mine has always been confined by its tree.

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I also have a summer version, Clematis purpurea which has purple foliage and similarly fragrant white flowers. It does take up a lot of real estate, but I love it. I also cut it back to the ground every year, again after frost.

Bugbane, or Actaea simplex, or Baneberry, or, my preference, Cimicifuga, has fine lacy leaves that start early summer. Very attractive, but its real attraction comes, at least in my yard, in September, long graceful fluffy wands of intensely fragrant tiny flowers. I love to bring just the wands indoors because they fill the house with their cinnamon-like scent.



Cimicifuga

There are both green leaved cultivars and almost black leaved ones (Black Knight). They enjoy shade and reasonably moist soil, and over time will spread. Actaea simplex is also toxic, and so happily not attractive to deer and rabbits.

Lastly, one more lovely autumn flower has always been known as Autumn Joy Sedum, which grows slowly all summer but doesn't flush with color until very late.

Autumn Joy is an upright rather than low growing sedum. However, it has been reclassified as Hylotelephium and is now a separate genus from the sedums although still in the stonecrop family Crassulaceae.



Sweet Autumn Clemitis

I don't need to say much as I am guessing it is familiar to most of you. What you might not realize is that when you cut it for bouquets, you never have to throw it out, as it roots in water. The flowers dry, eventually new buds come, and the stems stay alive and can be planted again in the spring. I just freshen the water every week or so.

Enjoy!