

# GROWERTALKS

## Columns

8/25/2011

### What to Do With the Leftovers?

*Chris Fifo*



**CHRIS FIF0**

As my family was cleaning up after dinner one night and packing away the leftovers in what little space we had in the fridge, one of the kids asked what we do at the greenhouse with our leftovers. Leftover perennials, that is. Though sad, the reality is that many plants get thrown away. So much time and energy just to create a beautiful compost pile.

No! That can't be! The kids offered up several alternatives. My teenage girls suggested we donate them to our local Veteran's home and retirement communities. My 10-year-old boys thought we should go up and down the street giving them to neighbors. While these are both noble and thoughtful ideas, they are neither practical, nor profitable. Our greenhouse did donate some to the House of Compassion and our local county government, but Mother Nature was not as kind to us as we would

have liked this spring and we have a few more leftovers than we are accustomed to.

Why not carry them over until next year? After all, they are perennials. At Swift Greenhouses, we've always carried over our more valuable items such as fancy echinacea and hosta. But this last year, we trialed more of an assortment of items like aquilegia, phlox and asters with great success. They came back bigger, and with more flowers than I expected. Even with the minimal care they received, there were far fewer losses than I had predicted.

We kept them in the 4- and 6-in. pots, but could easily have bumped them up to a 1- or 2-gal. container for next year's sales. We trimmed up dead foliage and spent blooms on some. Others had to be cut back just to make them manageable. Then around August 1, when we needed the space, we threw them outside. With most of our greenhouse space occupied through the fall, we make the most of unused areas around the perimeters. Our rule is simple: If you can reach it with a hose and it won't get run over, it's usable growing space. If there's a low spot with standing water, we'll put pots on risers (we use old plug trays); otherwise, they go directly on the ground. And that's where they stay.

As I said, the care they get is minimal. They don't get fungicides, so we stay away from varieties that tend to have issues, such as monarda with powdery mildew. They don't get the best watering (it's usually helpers and

Mother Nature taking care of that), so we stay away from varieties that are moisture sensitive, like asclepias and lupines. They also don't get growth regulators. This would just add to the cost of keeping them, and frankly, we're not concerned with their looks.

What they do get is this:

- Regular feeding to maintain health and an active root system. This is always a great place for us to get rid of unwanted and unused fertilizers. It doesn't really matter what kind.
- Insecticide sprays as necessary. But sometimes, good bugs will come in and take care of the bad bugs for us.
- Plenty of sun and heat to bulk them up (except shade crops that go on the north side).
- Pre-emergence herbicide would be helpful; however, we grow seedlings and don't want any of this around.

By the middle of October, we see the first signs of dormancy and cut back on water and fertilizer. Energy is drawn from the leaves and stored in the roots for next year's growth. From this point on, we don't do much of anything. We may cover some of the more tender varieties with a foam blanket; otherwise, we let the snow pile up. When we're ready for them the following spring, we'll clean up the dead foliage and force them into bloom in a warm greenhouse as normal.

So when it comes to your leftovers, make the most of your "usable" growing space and hang on to those perennials for next year. But if you don't have room in your fridge, don't forget those charitable donations. **GT**

---

*Chris Fifo is Technical Services Advisor for Swift Greenhouses, Inc. in Gilman, Iowa.*