

Dog Days in the Garden

Written by Alice Massey

Wednesday, 08 August 2018 07:47



Recently a gardening friend adopted a new golden retriever puppy. Adorable as this sweet thing is, she is a digger and has already torn up several formerly lovely garden beds. She is fast; turn your back for a minute and she creates horticultural havoc, smiling as only golden retrievers can and wagging her tiny tail.

This little pup reminds me of a golden we had years ago named Chipper. Our sons, little boys at the time, loved a book titled *The Digging-est Dog*, and they were sure it had been written about their own Chip. He too was a digger; you could just see the glee in his eyes when he was tearing up the soil.

It was a constant battle keeping him from digging in the garden beds. One day, we were trying to clear a wooded area of Smilax vines. If you have ever tried to remove Smilax you know it grows from an underground tuber that can reach several feet in length. The dog sat there looking at us silly humans struggling with the pernicious and prickly vine that was next to impossible to eradicate. Have you ever heard a dog sigh? Chip was sighing with exasperation at our feeble efforts. Finally, the light bulb went off – oh, the dog wanted to help us.

OK, “dig here Chip,” we said, and he went to town. In mere minutes he had the first vine, along with its elongated roots, out of the ground. Oh my, he was proud. You could see it. All it took

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was a few attaboy's and he continued to dig where we asked him to. In addition to clearing our woodland, we realized we could use this new pet trick to our advantage.

Every time something needed to be planted I just pointed to a spot and said "dig here," and he did. He would then sit at my side while I stuck a plant in the spot and carefully replaced the well aerated soil he had dug out. Chip seemed to take ownership of the garden after a while and his random digging stopped as long as I gave him another digging job to do once in a while. No matter how many hours I was working in the garden he was always by my side just waiting to be needed.

I miss Chip. He has been gone for many years, but having such a good gardening buddy was special. Later family dogs would sit with me while I worked outside, and having that company was lovely, but I was never able to train another to be a gardening dog.

No digging going on during August in my garden; it is just too hot and way too wet. How about all this rain we have been having? Afternoon showers have always been the norm this time of year but not ones that drop several inches of water in a fell swoop. If you used slow release fertilizer pellets like Osmocote that would normally last the entire growing season watch, your plants carefully. Too much water and heat can flush the fertilizer sooner. If plants start to lose color and vigor it is possible those pellets gave out early and some additional nutrition is in order. I would not use more long acting pellets this late in the season, but some liquid food along with some compost should do the trick. As always, try and avoid bloom buster foods that are high in phosphorus; our soils are generally so high in that element to begin with adding additional can be harmful to your plants. I tend to prefer organic formulas as they enrich the soil.

Stay cool and dry and dream about cool fall days. There is nothing like a Lowcountry autumn for gardeners and their dogs.