

GARDENING in



OCTOBER

By Karen Cole-Peralta

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When you feel that first solid bite in the breeze and you see the songbirds winging their way south, and the trees are bursting with fire-laden hues, you know you can't be spending the weekend curled up by the fireplace with a good book. Not for long.

While the weather is still gardener-friendly, you must shorten your "to-do" lists for the coming of late fall and early winter. Now is the time to attack your lawn and garden by planting your spring bulbs, buying and maintaining your trees and shrubs, doing your late autumn lawn care, using common-sense watering strategies, building a compost bin and making your own compost, controlling the many common garden pests, and winning at the weed-whacking war before the sudden onset of the fickle, cold and all-enveloping winter season.

Planting Your Perennials

Plant the spring-flowering bulbs until the ground becomes frozen, and prepare your tender but tenacious perennials for the coming seasonal changes. Remember that in the milder climates, bulbs can still be divided and transplanted. Plant hardy bulbs anytime before the soil freezes, but it's best to plant them early enough so the root systems can grow before winter arrives. In some climates, you can plant until Thanksgiving or even Christmas. Late-planted bulbs develop roots in the spring, and may bloom late. But they'll arrive on time by next year.

Be sure to position the bulbs at their proper depth. They must be planted so their bottoms rest at a depth two-and-a-half times each bulb's diameter. In well-drained or sandy soil, plant an inch or two deeper to increase life and discourage rodents.

Bulbs look best planted in groups.

So use a garden spade instead of a bulb planter, which encourages you to plant singly. Set the bulbs side-by-side and plant groups of them in holes the size of a dinner plate, or dig curving trenches and position the bulbs in the bottom. Water your bulbs after planting to stimulate the roots to grow.

Interplanting creates maximum flowering in a tight space and eliminates bare spots when "dead" bulbs don't grow. For a succession of blooms and foliage, plant perennials around the bulb holes. As the bulb foliage dwindles, the perennials will grow, camouflaging the bulbs' yellowing leaves.

Choosing Your Trees and Shrubs

October is a wonderful time to shop for trees and shrubs at the nursery. They're now showing their best and brightest colors there. You can plant them now and over the next few months, so that strong, healthy roots will grow over the winter.

You must carefully plan out your landscape to choose which trees you wish to plant for providing proper lawn coverage and the most beautiful scenery. When an appropriate tree is purchased, selected and planted in the right place, it frames your home and beautifies your land, making both more enjoyable. Trees can greatly increase the resale value of property, and even save you on energy costs.

Visualize your new trees at maturity while realizing that some trees develop as much width as height if given enough space to develop. Picture each tree's size and shape in relation to the overall landscape and the size and style of your home. Trees peaking at forty feet do best near or behind a one-story home. Taller trees blend with two-story houses and large lots. Trees under thirty feet tall suit streetside locations, small lots and enclosed areas such as decks and patios.

There are two basic types of trees you will be considering for purchase. Deciduous trees include large shade trees which frame areas with a cool summer canopy and a colorful autumn rack of superior colors. In winter, their silhouettes provide passage for sunlight. These trees can shade a southern exposure from summertime heat, and allow winter sunlight to warm the house. Evergreen trees have dense green foliage that suits them for planting as privacy screens, windbreaks or backdrops for flowering trees and shrubs. But they are handsome enough to stand alone. They do not lose their leaves, called needles, and provide year-round shelter and color. You should be sure to include a wide variety of both kinds of trees in your landscape to avoid losing them to diseases or pests. Buy disease- and pest-resistant trees.

When buying a tree, look for healthy green leaves if it has any, and also well-developed top growth. Branches should be unbroken and balanced around the trunk, and on dormant or bare-root stock they should be pliable. Examine the roots, which should form a balanced, fully-formed mass. Reject trees with broken or dried-out roots. Avoid trees showing signs of disease, pests or stress such as wilting, discoloration, misshapen leaves, scarred bark and nonvigorous growth. Consider the size of the tree. Young trees have a better rate of success when planted, and most flowering trees grow quickly, so start with less expensive, smaller specimens. And be sure and buy all your plants from a good quality nursery with a decent reputation.

Don't prune a newly planted tree unless its form needs improving.

Prune flowering trees in spring, after blooming, to correct unsightly problems. Crab apple trees are an exception and should be pruned in late winter. But you can remove diseased or dead branches anytime of the year, and much of this is done during the winter. Apply fertilizer when needed in the second and subsequent growing seasons. Mulch to conserve moisture, reduce weeds and eliminate mowing near the tree. Spread wood chips or bark four inches deep and as wide as the tree's canopy around the base. But don't mulch poorly drained oversaturated soil. Wrap tree trunks after planting to prevent winter damage from weather and pests. And stake young trees, especially bare-root trees and evergreens, to fortify them against strong winds. Stake loosely and allow the tree to bend slightly, and remove stakes after one year.

Shrubs are often planted and used merely as foundation plants or privacy screens. But shrubbery foliage is vastly more versatile, and can go a long way toward livening up your landscaping. Countless varieties of gorgeously hued and beautifully leafed shrubs are available through nurseries and garden catalogs.

You must start by learning what varieties thrive in your area. Try visiting your local arboretum, where you may view different kinds of shrubs and decide whether they fit your gardening plans. Decide what overall look you want at different times of the year, and then find out which shrubs will be flowering, producing berries or sporting colorful foliage at those times. Compare what you find to the inventory at your local nursery, and ask the professionals who work there lots of questions.

Understand the characteristics of each shrub before you plant it. Flowering and fruit-bearing shrubs enhance a new home, but improper pruning and care will ruin the beauty of all your hard work. Some shrubs bloom on second- or third-year wood. If you're maintaining a shrub because you're hoping it's going to blossom, but you're cutting off first-year wood every year, it's never going to bloom.

Some varieties are a foot tall at maturity, while others reach over fifteen feet. A large shrub will usually require more pruning. Also determine the plant's ability to tolerate various soil conditions, wind, sun and shade. You don't put a plant that's sensitive to the elements in an open area. Use hardier plants to shelter it.

Not all shrubs work in every climate. Witch hazel, for example, blooms in fall or winter and is hardiest where minimum temperatures range from thirty degrees below zero to twenty degrees above. It would not be a good choice for very dry, hot climates. But some shrubs such as buddleia, hydrangea and spirea perform well across a wide range of growing zones.

Most shrubs are relatively fast-growing. Those that follow the shape and scale of a home will do more to make a home site look established. For example, if you have a long, ranch-style house the shrubs should be rectangular. If you have a two-story home, you're going to want some leafy shrubs that are a little more upright.

You could try buying larger shrubs instead of trees because they don't cost that much more than smaller shrubs and they help a landscape look fuller. Larger shrubs will go through some shock recovery, but typically it doesn't take a shrub as long as a tree to bounce back. Position shrubs as if they are full-size, leaving ample room for them to fill out. Viburnum, barberry, honeysuckle and hydrangea are all good choices to surround almost any house.

Late Autumn Lawn Care

Aerate lawns in mid- to late-October, while the grass can recover easily. If you core aerate, make your cores three inches deep, spaced about every six inches. Break up the cores and spread them around. If your lawn needs it, thatch and follow with a fall or winter fertilizer. Even if thatching isn't needed, your lawn will be happy for a dusting of fertilizer to help roots gain strength before the spring growing season. Overseed bald patches or whole lawns as needed.

Rake and compost leaves as they fall, as well as grass clippings from mowing. If left on the ground now, they'll make a wet, slippery mess that's inviting to pests.

Good gardeners use heavy-duty molded plastic for shaping neat edges of beds. You can buy these from garden centers, nurseries and mail order suppliers in rolls of flat, four- to six-inch-tall plastic, and the edging installs easily. You'll save yourself countless hours of removing grass and weeds that otherwise creep into your beds.

Watering Your Lawn and Garden

You can't forget about watering in the middle of fall. The summer's long over, but proper moisture now is key to your plants' survival over the cold winter months. You're likely to hear two pieces of advice on watering. One is that you should give established plants an inch of water per week, whether from rain or irrigation. The other is that personal observation of your own garden is the only way to judge how much water it needs. One fact about which there is more agreement: the ideal is to maintain constant moisture, not a cycle of wet soil followed by dry soil.

Although overwatering can be as big a problem as underwatering, most gardeners err on the side of too little. Your needs will vary through the year depending on the rate of evapotranspiration in your garden. Evapotranspiration refers to the two ways that plants lose water. There's evaporation, the loss of water to the air from soil, water and other surfaces. Then the other way is called transpiration, or water lost primarily from the leaves and stems of the plants. You can often obtain evapotranspiration rates for local areas from water departments and other agencies. You will see a graphic description of how a plant's natural need for water changes during the growing season.

In the meantime, keep these pointers in mind:

- 1) Water when it's needed, not according to the calendar. Check the top six inches of the soil. If it's dry and falls apart easily, water. Your plants will also show signs that they need water. Wilting, curling or brown leaves mean that your plants may lack adequate water. Meanwhile, bear in mind that excess water creates a lack of oxygen in plants, making them show similar symptoms to underwatering.
- 2) Water slowly, not more than one-half inch of water per hour. Too much water can be lost to runoff. This is why handheld watering cans or handheld hoses generally work only for watering small areas.
- 3) Water deeply. With established vegetables and flowers, six inches is a minimum. With trees and shrubs, water one to two feet or more. Shallow watering does more harm than good; it discourages plants from developing the deep roots they need to find their own water. Except when you are watering seedlings, soil should never be wet only in the top layer.

4) Water in the morning, never during the hottest part of the day. Too much water may be lost to evaporation. Watering in the evening sometimes causes problems in humid climates, particularly with overhead watering, which wets all the foliage. Plants that remain wet at night sometimes come down with disease and fungal growth.

5) Don't allow runoff. On heavy clay soil, one inch of water will probably cause runoff. At the first sign that water is not penetrating the soil, turn it off. Irrigate in an hour or so, after the initial water has penetrated.

The increased use of piped municipal water and the invention of sprinklers have made mechanical irrigation the most commonly used watering method, particularly for lawns and large areas. Sprinkler irrigation works best with well-draining soils and shallow-rooted plants, or where a cooling effect is desired. But sprinklers have several disadvantages. They waste water, since much of it is sprayed on areas other than the root zone around the plant. Because much of the water is thrown high in the air, loss due to evaporation can be significant. Sprinklers can also foster fungal diseases and other problems with some plants such as roses that don't like having wet foliage. Sprinklers require good water pressure and are best used on plants which are not in bloom. Several types of sprinklers are available.

Drip or trickle irrigation using low-flow hoses or emitters can save more than half the water that overhead sprinklers lose due to evaporation or runoff. It also reduces disease, because the foliage is never wetted. This type of irrigation never saturates the soil, so there is little bad effect on overall soil structure. Since the area that's watered is smaller, weed growth is reduced as well. And drip systems don't require trenching. You can design a simple drip system to direct low flows of water to individual plants, either by laying polyethylene tubing on the ground or burying it shallowly. Or you can buy a more sophisticated custom-designed system. But drip systems have their limitations. They don't work for lawns or broad areas, and they can be damaged if children or pets dig them up. The required number of emitters, misters and sprayers can add up costwise. A drip system also may require a water-pressure reducer to keep low-volume fittings functioning properly.

Soaker hoses are similar to drip systems in some ways, but are even simpler. Soaker hoses "leak" water along the length of the hose. You can buy flat plastic hoses or soakers made from recycled rubber tires, known as sweaty hoses or leaky pipe soakers. And garden stores are filled with many other kinds of gadgets and tools to help you water your garden, such as rain gauges, mechanical and electronic timers, and watering cans.

For small areas, container plantings and seedlings, watering cans work well. Make sure your can has an attachment so that water can be delivered like a fine rain. When picking a can, keep in mind that they are quite heavy when filled. A two-gallon container full of water is as heavy as most people can carry. Make sure that the handle and the rest of the can are designed for ease of carrying.

[Get Your Own Survival Tools and Equipment.](#) Thousands of items to choose from. Just for example, you will find 23 different tools to start a fire. There is one method that will easily and surely light a fire in a fierce rainstorm any time you need it. Yet the fire will extinguish instantly to avoid detection, leaving no residue, no odor, and **no smoke.**

Building a Bin and Making Your Own Compost

A bin will contain your compost pile and make it more attractive as well as keep it from spilling or blowing over into your yard. A circular or square structure can be made from fencing wire. The idea is to push the compost material together to make it heat up and rot properly. The bin should be at least three feet wide and three feet deep to provide enough space for the spreading material. Use untreated wood or metal fence posts for the corners and wrap sturdy wire fencing around them. The fence mesh should be small enough that rotting materials won't fall out. When the compost is ready, unwind the wire and scoop from the bottom of the pile. Then re-pile the undecomposed material and wrap the wire back around the heap.

Many hard-core gardeners feel that three compost bins are the best for serious composting. By building a trio of bins you can compost in stages: one bin will be ready, one will be brewing and one will always be starting. Installing a cover, such as a plastic tarp or a piece of wood, helps to cut odor, control moisture and keep out wild pests. You will also want to use the right ingredients for a proper, lovely smelling rotting compost heap.

It's easy to cook up your own pile. At first, layer grass clippings with a dash of leaves and twigs to create a concoction that turns into humus, the best plant food. Added ingredients for the compost comes from everyday waste in the kitchen and yard. But avoid any items that ruin your compost. Use green materials such as fruit and vegetable scraps, eggshells, coffee grounds, and grass and plant clippings; and brown materials, such as leaves, wood and bark chips, shredded newspaper, straw and sawdust from untreated wood. Avoid using any meat, oil, fat, grease, diseased plants, sawdust or chips from pressure-treated wood, dog or cat feces, weeds that go to seed or dairy products. These can befoul, spoil and make smelly and rancid a perfectly good productive compost heap.

There are two types of composting: cold and hot. Cold composting is as simple as piling up your yard waste or taking out the organic materials in your trash such as fruit and vegetable peels, coffee grounds or egg shells and then piling them in your yard. Over the course of a year or so, the material will decompose. Hot composting is for the more serious gardener; you'll get compost in one to three months during warm weather. Four ingredients are required for fast-cooking hot compost: nitrogen, carbon, air and water. These items feed microorganisms, which speed up the process of decay.

To create your own organic hot-compost heap, wait until you have enough material to make a pile that's three feet deep. To ensure an even composition, first create alternating four-inch layers of green and brown materials. Green materials such as vegetable scraps, grass clippings and plant trimmings create nitrogen. Brown materials such as leaves, shredded newspaper and twigs create carbon. Sprinkle water over the pile regularly so it has the consistency of a damp sponge. Don't add too much, or the microorganisms will become waterlogged and won't heat the pile.

During the growing season, you should provide the pile with oxygen by turning it once a week with a pitchfork. The best time is when the center of the pile feels very warm. Stirring up the pile helps it cook faster and prevents material from becoming matted down and developing a bad odor. At this point, the layers have served their purpose of creating equal amounts of green and brown materials throughout the pile. Stir it thoroughly, turning it over repeatedly. When the compost no longer gives off heat and becomes dry, brown and crumbly, it's fully cooked and ready to feed to your garden.

Concentrated Pest Control

Slugs and other pests don't disappear as the weather gets cooler. You'll find them at all life stages in October, from eggs to youngsters and adults. For slugs, use whatever measures you prefer, salt, slug bait or saucers of beer to eliminate them. It's best to catch them at the early stages to stop the reproduction cycle. And keep the ground well-raked and tidied to reduce their natural habitat.

Here's a list of common garden pests and how to control them:

Thrips: Adult thrips are about one-sixteenth-inch long and have dark bodies with four fringed wings. Their size makes them difficult to detect in the garden. They attack young leaves, flower stalks and buds. Spray young foliage, developing buds and the soil around the bush with an insecticide containing acephate.

Cane borer: This insect is the maggot of the eggs laid by sawflies or carpenter bees in the freshly-cut cane of the rose after pruning. One telltale sign is a neatly-punctured hole visible on the top of the cane. To remove the pest, cut several inches down the cane until there are no more signs of the maggot or pith-eaten core. Seal all pruning cuts with pruning sealer.

Japanese beetle, Fuller rose beetle: These will eat parts of the foliage and sometimes the flowers. Pick beetles off the bush by hand. Or spray foliage and flowers with an insecticide containing acephate or malathion.

Leaf miner: This insect can be spotted on foliage by the appearance of irregular white chain-like blisters containing its grub. Remove foliage and discard it to prevent further infestation.

Spittle bug: This small, greenish-yellow insect hides inside a circular mass of white foam on the surface of new stems, usually during the development of the first bloom cycle in early spring. Spray a jet of water to remove the foam and the insect.

Roseslug: When you see new foliage with a skeletonized pattern, indicating that it has been eaten, chances are it's the roseslug. Remove the infected foliage and spray with insecticidal soap or an insecticide that contains acephate.

Leaf cutter bee: As its name implies, this very small yellowish-green insect jumps on the undersides of foliage to feast, often leaving its white skin behind. The damage caused by this insect often results in defoliation. Use an insecticide containing acephate or malathion to prevent it from establishing a strong colony.

Rose scale: This insect hides under gray scales, normally on old canes or stems. It feeds by sucking the sap, weakening the plant. If the infestation is localized, try removing it with a fingernail. Or spray with an insecticide containing acephate.

Spider mite: It builds huge colonies underneath leaves, giving the appearance of salt-and-pepper particles. If the problem is detected early, you can control it chemically with insecticides containing acephate or malathion. Spray the underside of the leaves. Or you can apply a fine misting of water to the foliage's undersides to wash the mites to the ground. They can't fly, so they will die on the soil surface.

Rose aphid: This is the commonest insect enemy in the rose garden, and is often referred to as the greenfly. It's a small, green soft-bodied insect often found in large colonies, particularly on the first lush spring growth, sucking sap from stems. Control by washing off the rose stems with water or spraying with an insecticide containing acephate or malathion.

Plant bugs: This is a large group of insects that includes the lygus bug and stink bug. Plant bugs attack the developing bud by sucking the sap. While feeding, they inject a toxic substance that breaks down plant tissue, causing the distortion and premature death of the bud. Apply a systemic insecticide such as RosePride Systemic to prevent further attacks.

Weed Whacking Made Easy

Actually, this is a slight exaggeration. There's no rest for the wicked. Keep staying ahead of your nasty weeds all this and next month. They serve as Home Sweet Home for all manner of pests and bugs, and destroying them before they flower and seed will save you much work in the future.

Preparation is the key. All gardeners know what it's like to have their yards invaded by unwelcome plants. Although there's no really easy way to banish weeds, there are a few solid techniques you can use to reclaim your turf. At the very least, you can limit this utmost in hostile takeovers.

Here is a simple outline of effective battle strategies you can use in the fall:

- 1) Be a mulching maniac. Mulch acts as a suffocating blanket by preventing light from reaching weed seeds. At the same time, it holds moisture for your plants and provides nutrients for your soil as it decomposes. Apply coarse mulch, such as bark or wood chips, directly onto soil. Leaves, grass clippings, or straw work better as a weed deterrent with a separating layer of newspaper, cardboard or fabric between them and the soil.
- 2) Water those weeds. Pulling weeds is easier and more efficient when the soil is moist. You are more likely to get the whole root system, and your yanking won't disturb surrounding plants as much either. No rain? Turn on the sprinkler or even water individual weeds, leave for a few hours and then get your hands dirty. Just ignore the strange looks from your neighbors as you lovingly water your weeds.
- 3) Cut weeds down in their prime. Weeds love open soil. But if you till or cultivate and then wait to plant, you can outmaneuver the weeds. Till the ground at least twice before you plant. Your first digging will bring dormant weed seeds to the surface where they can germinate. Watch and wait for a few weeks until they begin to grow. Then slice up the weeds again with a tiller or a hoe, only don't dig as deep. Now it should be safe to put precious plants into the soil.
- 4) Pass the salt. Try sweeping rock salt into crevices between paths. Although more harsh, borax also works well. Be sure to wear rubber gloves with the latter material. You might need to apply a few doses, but be aware of any surrounding plants because both products kill the good plants along with the bad.

5) Lay down the law. Try using landscape fabric as a weed controller. Landscape fabric is usually made of a nonwoven, porous polypropylene material which enables air, water and nutrients to reach the soil but keeps weed seeds in a dark, cool environment where they can't germinate. You lay down the fabric, cut a hole where your plants are positioned or will be planted and then cover the fabric with a two- to four-inch layer of mulch or gravel. However, landscape fabric doesn't work well on steep slopes or a windy site, where the mulch often slides off or is blown away, exposing the fabric. Never use plastic, as it prevents moisture and air from reaching your plants' roots.

6) Boil them alive. If you have pesky weeds in a spot with no nearby grass or valuable plants, boil water and pour it over the unsuspecting weeds. To control the stream of boiling water and to save surrounding plants and your toes from a scalding, use a teakettle.

7) To compost or not to compost. After you've labored to rid your garden of weeds, be careful that you don't throw them onto the compost heap where they can drop seed and infect your entire yard. When you pull or till young weeds, leave them where you chop them and let the sun dry them out, and then use them as mulch. Throw mature weeds on a hot compost pile where they should cook at two hundred degrees or higher for several weeks to ensure the seeds are killed.

8) Cover your ground. Cultivate plants close together or grow winter ground cover in areas that typically suffer from weed invasions. A thick mass of plants not only is attractive but also shelters the soil from direct sunlight, making it more difficult for weed seeds to prosper.

9) Old-fashioned elbow grease. Weed every couple of weeks throughout the growing season in order to stay in control of the weed situation. If you're going to get down and dirty, use a comfortable knee cushion or try pads to lessen the impact of weeding on your body. You can also try an upright tool such as the Weed Hound, which prevents excessive bending or body strain.

10) Solar-powered soil. Solarization uses heat to disinfect your soil. If you have a large planting bed or area of lawn that you want to reseed, till the area to clear all vegetation. Then water the area until it is saturated. Wait one whole day, and then cover with clear three- to six-mil plastic sheeting. Bury the edges of the sheeting to seal it. Let the soil cook for four to six weeks, then remove the plastic. If any weeds appear, till them lightly without disturbing the soil. Wait a few days for the soil to cool and then start planting. This method gets rid of many soil-borne diseases as well.

11) Kiss my grits. You can try a natural weed control such as WOW! (WithOut Weeds) which is made from a byproduct of corn. It acts as a preemergent, and is best applied during the spring, killing weeds before they germinate. A second application at the end of the growing season kills weeds that sprout late in summer and go to seed in the fall. Its nontoxic formula is safe, and it releases nitrogen into your soil.

12) Identify your weeds. If you can ID the sprouting menaces in your yard, you can control their reseeding habits better. Annual weeds complete their growing cycle from seeds to plants in a few months and then die. Unfortunately, they can leave behind thousands of babies if they go to seed, so always try to remove annuals before they drop seeds. Perennial weeds usually live for at least three years and are more difficult to banish, so at first sighting remove them immediately.

13) Time is tight. If your weeds are starting to grow but you don't have the time or energy to pull them up at the moment, suffocate the weeds by covering them with a block of wood or piece of plastic. Better yet, use a few large decorative stones, a big-based work of art or a birdbath. At least you'll stop the weeds from spreading so you can tackle them when you have time.

14) Off with their heads. To stop weeds from spreading, pluck off their flower heads before they drop seed. This technique can be especially helpful with annual weeds, which love to provide generation after generation of seeds.

Food for Thought

In addition to performing these autumnal lawn and garden duties, you may want to harvest your fall vegetables such as the perennial squashes. Do a taste test and harvest them when flavor is at its peak. If you'd like to extend the harvest of carrots, turnips and other root vegetables, leave some in the ground to mulch as the weather gets colder. Early next month, before temperatures drop too much, seed cover crops such as clover, peas or vetch to enrich the soil. It will serve as a natural fertilizer, stifle weed growth and help loosen up the soil for next year's crops.

As for your houseplants that you've put outside for the summer, if September was mild enough that your geraniums and other such plants are still outdoors, be sure to make them cozy inside before the first frost takes a bite out of them. Take geranium cuttings of two to four inches to root indoors. If you treat houseplants chemically, be sure to keep them warm and away from direct sunlight. Fertilize houseplants now and they won't need it again until March. And remember to get your poinsettias and your Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti ready for well-timed holiday color. Give them a daily dose of ten hours of bright daylight or four hours of direct sun and fourteen hours of night darkness. Cacti need a cool environment of fifty to sixty degrees, while poinsettias prefer a warmer sixty-five to seventy degrees. Be sure and let your cacti dry out between waterings.

For a true gardenaholic, winter is often considered to be the enemy. But with a few steps toward preparation in the early- to mid-fall, you can take care of your lawn, garden and houseplants in a way that will keep them thriving and surviving until the dawning of yet another most welcome and bountiful springtime.

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