

April 2009

Easter provides some useful extra time for outdoor gardening at a time when there's lots of seeds to sow, flower borders to plant up and weeds to keep under control.

Plant growth should be strong, and spring-flowering rhododendrons, azaleas and bulbs should be providing lots of colour and interest.

LAWN CARE

Lawn grasses will have started growing as the soil warms up and mowing needs to start in earnest. As you mow you will probably notice that there are thin, bare patches and the colour of the remaining grass is verging towards pale yellow, rather than rich green. If you look harder then you may spot patches of moss in shady areas and the inevitable weed marring the look. If you can spot any two of these symptoms then your lawn needs a thorough make-over to get back into a decent lawn rather than a simple patch of weedy grass.

To get your lawn back into shape you don't need to spend a lot of time or money. One simple application of a 4-in-1 product will make a miraculous difference. Applying EverGreen Complete granules using the built-in hand spreader will only take 10 minutes to treat the average sized lawn and won't cost you more than £10. In some retailers a darn sight less!

This unique treatment not only kills moss and broadleaved weeds such as dandelions, daisies and white clover, but it greens up the grass for up to 6 weeks and helps build a thicker lawn with stronger roots which protect the grass against heat, drought and other stresses. Apply the treatment on a warm dry day mid-way between mowings. You will get much better weed control if you treat the lawn 3 or 4 days after mowing and leave a similar time after application before mowing again. And if no rainfall occurs within 2 days of application then water in the granules so they can get feeding the roots.

Regular mowing is a vital part of lawn care. A quick whiz with a sharp and well-adjusted mower will only take you a few minutes if you do the job every week. Mowing as often as you are able will encourage the fine grasses and allow the grass enough energy to thicken up. The trick is not to cut the lawn too short. This is not easy if you have a hover mower, but others do have a height adjustment that will allow you to leave the grass around 3cm (1") long for spring. A lawn cut much shorter than this allows the easy establishment of broad-leaved weeds such as dandelion and daisies.

TIMELY TIPS

Trim around the edge of the lawn with shears to provide a tidy look to the lawn and to remove the shady places where slugs are usually hiding during the day.

GRO YOUR OWN FRUIT & VEG

Easter is the traditional time to plant out new potatoes in garden soil producing a tasty crop in July. Potatoes are a hungry crop that provides maximum yields after the soil has been enriched with plenty of organic matter. If you have well-rotted garden compost use this or add the spent compost from last year's growing bags. If you have no reserves of organic matter you can buy bags of Levington Organic Blend Farmyard Manure or Miracle-Gro Eco-Sense Soil Improver from your local garden centre.

For those people without the room to grow potatoes in open soil, there is a Miracle-Gro Potato & Vegetable gro-sac. This can be placed onto a sunny patio or balcony where up to 5 potatoes can be grown to give an ample crop.

You can also plant onion sets at this time. Push the tiny immature bulbs of onions, known as sets, into the soil choosing a sunny spot where the much larger onion crop will ripen.

April is a great month for sowing different vegetable seeds. Clear the area with Weedol Gun! Max which allows sowing immediately after the treatment is dry. Start to sow short rows of salad crops, such as lettuce, radish, beetroot and spring onions. At the same time find space for early carrots, leeks, broad beans, cabbage, cauliflower and maincrop peas. For full details on growing cabbages and root vegetables such as carrots and parsnips, go to www.lovethegarden.com and find the Gro Your Own category under the 'It's Gro Time' heading.

On the kitchen window sill sow seeds of herbs such as parsley, basil, coriander and rocket plus tender vegetables such as calabrese and tomatoes. Use a general purpose compost such as Levington Multi-Purpose and transplant into trays as soon as they are large enough to handle easily. When moving the seedlings to larger quarters, see they have enough room to develop into sturdy plants.

Strawberries will be developing new leaves which are soft, tender and an ideal home to aphids. Control these sap sucking insects as soon as you notice them with a spray of the ready-to-use BugClear Gun! for Fruit & Veg. Hard frosts can damage the open blooms of strawberries preventing them from turning into fruit. When your fruit is in flower cover them with newspapers on frosty nights to reduce damage.

Similarly if frosty nights are forecast you should try to protect the flowers of peach trees or bushes using sheets of fleece.

TIMELY TIPS

All seedlings are vulnerable to slug attack, and a light sprinkling of SlugClear Advanced Pellets will protect your investment.

RHODODENDRONS AND AZALEAS

When in flower these plants can be really spectacular, especially when grown in natural woodland that provides gentle shade and the correct acid soil. Many of the Yakushimanum varieties are more tolerant of soil conditions, although they still prefer acid soils.

There is still time for planting, although you will need to use an ericaceous compost to provide the right conditions for the plant to thrive. Ask your local garden centre for advice – they will know of the soil types in your locality and if rhododendrons are suitable to plant.

Pieris and Japanese maples have attractive foliage in spring and summer and need the same acid conditions as rhododendron and azaleas. But if the soil in your garden isn't acid then it can be difficult to keep them thriving without a little help. To keep them growing well and to ward off yellowing leaves, apply an iron supplement in spring such as Murphy Sequestrene Plant Tonic or feed them with Miracle-Gro Slow Release

Azalea, Camellia and Rhododendron Plant Food. The controlled release plant food is ideal as it will gradually feed your plants and supply essential iron and magnesium for up to six months.

TIMELY TIPS

Once flowering has finished snap off seed heads so the new shoots that will carry next year's blooms are encouraged.

THE DECORATIVE FLOWER GARDEN

Keep the flower garden tidy by pruning out finished flowering stems of spring flowering shrubs such as forsythia and winter jasmine. Feed the plants so that they produce a fresh batch of flowering wands for next year's display.

To save money on filling large flower beds with summer blooms buy a few packets of Hardy annual seeds. These include many cottage garden favourites including alyssum, gypsophila, poppy, larkspur, cornflower, sweet scabious, love-in-a-mist, Virginia stock, candytuft and everlasting flowers. Unlike petunias, busy lizzies and French marigolds, these hardy annuals are not killed by frost and are as tough as old boots.

Preparation is quick and easy too. All you need to do is clean up the soil with a weedkiller such as Weedol Gun! MAX that shows visible effect in just 1 hour and seeds or plants can be sown or planted as soon as the liquid has dried. Simply rake over the surface and sprinkle the seeds in swathes where they are to flower with tallest at the back and the shortest at the front.

All established plants need a feed at this time of the year, especially climbers such as clematis and honeysuckle, which put on phenomenal amounts of new growth. A slow release plant food such as Miracle-Gro Slow Release All Purpose Plant Food will encourage strong leaf growth with plenty of flowering potential.

It is also the time to plant bulbs, corms and tubers so they can produce super summer flowers of gladioli, dahlias, lilies, tigridia and acidenthera. In the south planting is normally carried out at the end of April. In colder northerly climes, May is early enough. Most of these plants come from warm soils that have excellent drainage so your planting technique needs to mirror their natural habitat. To improve the drainage of heavy clay soils add a good handful of sharp grit or sharp sand at the bottom of each planting hole. If your soil is really heavy then you will find you get better results if you plant lilies and other summer flowering bulbs in pots of Levington John Innes No.3. Simply half fill a large pot or small planter with the compost, position your bulbs so there is a gap between each one and cover with more compost.

Roses will be producing new foliage and this is the ideal time to start spraying them if they showed symptoms of rose blackspot disease last year. Choose a still, mild day and spray all stems and both sides of every leaf with RoseClear 3 or RoseClear 3 Gun! to give internal protection from this disfiguring disease. Further sprays a fortnight apart will be necessary to give protection to the new leaves that emerge later in the spring. These products will kill any greenfly or blackfly that have emerged and protect the plant from new attacks of powdery mildew and blackspot diseases. To minimise risk to bees, spray in the early morning or evening when these pollinators are less active.

As the sun gets stronger and the days get warmer garden pests start to take hold. Greenfly and blackfly, for example, can quickly ruin plants for a whole season if left to

distort and harm growth. Lupins, pansies, sweet peas and roses are most susceptible to these sap-sucking pests so inspect your plants regularly and spray these decorative plants with BugClear Ultra or BugClear Ultra Gun! as soon as an infestation is noticed.

TIMELY TIPS

Newly emerging shoots of hostas, delphiniums and many other bushy plants make great food for slugs and snails. To prevent these pests ruining your flower potential water them with a liquid slug killer such as SlugClear. It will kill the slugs that are hiding underground and protect the foliage from snail attack without leaving any visible residues to be picked up by domestic pets or wildlife.

THE PATIO GARDEN

Each month this Gardening Diary will feature one of the projects that have been put together to give inspiration to novice gardeners, to get dirt under their finger nails and to show how easy it is to achieve a more beautiful home, patio and garden.

You can download and print a leaflet with easy to follow steps and a suggested shopping list from www.lovethegarden.com . Look under the 'It's Gro Time' heading and find this one in the Patio Gardening section.

Outside space is precious to everyone, but all too often we don't have enough, or what we do have is overrun by kids toys, pets or for parking cars. So to reclaim a little corner back for yourself why not try 'vertical gardening' – the latest trend.

Even the tiniest of spaces can be transformed with a little 'vertical gardening'. In this project we have used an old step ladder to dress up a dingy corner but you could easily use hanging baskets, a trellis or pots fixed to walls or fence posts.

Pot up your new plants in your chosen container. Place a layer of gravel or broken pots at the bottom of the containers for drainage, then add some Miracle-Gro All Purpose Growing Compost. Place the root ball of your plant on to this layer and fill around with more compost. Water thoroughly and leave to drain.

Depending on the time of the year, plant up a selection of container type plants, including plenty of trailing ones such as ivy, fuchsias, geraniums. Experiment with different colour schemes, and try grouping different sized containers together for a more relaxed feel. Place one of the pots on each step of the ladder, or at different heights within your chosen plant area, with the trailing varieties towards the top.

Maintain by regular feeding with Miracle-Gro Liquefeed or Miracle-Gro Singles. Or if you want to feed and keep pests away use a BugClear Ultra for Pots stick, once the plants are established.

TOPICAL TIP

There's still time to plant strawberry plants in giant planters ready to produce a great crop of tasty fruits in time for Wimbledon fortnight. For great results look out for the Levington Strawberry Giant Planter.

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Always read the label. Use pesticides safely.

BugClear™ Ultra, BugClear™ Ultra for Pots and BugClear Ultra Gun!™ contain acetamiprid. BugClear Gun!™ for Fruit & Veg contains pyrethrins. EverGreen® Complete contains MCPA, mecoprop-P and ferrous sulphate. RoseClear® 3 and

RoseClear 3 Gun![™] contain bifenthrin and myclobutanil. SlugClear[™] and SlugClear[™] Advanced Pellets contain metaldehyde. Weedol® Gun[™] MAX contains pelargonic acid.

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