

April 2010 Gardening Diary

Easter is on the horizon and longer days herald the start of spring. As the sun warms the soil spring bulbs such as daffodils, narcissi, iris and even early tulips will be opening up to brighten the garden. On sunny days fragrant shrubs such as the Viburnum will be wafting perfume all around the garden. It's time to tidy up beds and borders and to make sure weeds don't take hold.

BEDS AND BORDERS

Nothing is more welcome in the spring garden than the bright clean yellow colours of miniature daffodils and the multi-coloured displays from modern hyacinths. When mixed with Glory of the snow (*Chionodoxa*) and drumstick primula you are guaranteed to wow anyone that has an ounce of interest in nature's diverse beauty.

To ensure your display looks good for the longest time, pick off all the faded flower heads as the petals wilt so the plant doesn't spend all its energy creating seed heads. While these bulbs are in leaf you also need to feed them so they can regenerate new flower buds deep inside the bulbs. For really best results you should dress the soil with a high potash plant food such as Miracle-Gro Bulb Booster. This can be used in the autumn when you are planting up your bulb display or in spring while the plants have foliage to turn these nutrients into plant energy.

Feeding is top priority all around the garden, especially for herbaceous plants and summer flowering shrubs and trees that are bursting into growth again. Some people like to use blood, fish and bone to provide balanced nutrients, but the smell can be overpowering. I prefer to use the chemical free formula of Miracle-Gro Organic Choice All Purpose Plant Food. It is formulated as a handy granule that doesn't pong, even though all the nutrients are derived from nature. Use it around herbaceous plants such as delphiniums, aquilegia, lupins, foxgloves and rudbeckia and under shrubs such as weigela, cistus, spirea and cotinus. Decorative trees will also benefit from a good spring feed, especially decorative cherries, crab apples and laburnum. Scatter the plant food granules in a circular area equivalent to the spread of the plant's branches. This is where the majority of the fine feeding roots, that absorb nutrients, are situated.

After feeding it's time to support tall growing perennials such as delphiniums, rudbeckia and lupins so that high winds do not instantly damage their growth. Provide support while the plants are small and you will save future disappointment. Where these are grown in a large clump of several plants you can construct a sturdy cage from twigs through which the flowering stems can grow. Or alternatively for individual plants you can buy suitable supports made from plastic coated wire.

Last, but not least, it's time to protect these new herbaceous plants from the ravages of slugs and snails with either a sprinkling of SlugClear Advanced Pellets or a liquid protector such as SlugClear Concentrated Liquid. The liquid is diluted in water and applied through a watering can over the foliage of decorative plants and onto the soil around them. This application method is better than traditional pellets in two ways – one it will control snails that climb plants to eat through emerging new leaves and two it will kill the hundreds of slugs that each day hide under the soil surface. With very vulnerable plants such as hostas, the canny gardener will use both methods to help ensure clean foliage that is not decimated by slimy enemies.

Now the soil is warming up seeds of hardy annuals such as marigold, cosmos, love-in-a-mist, poppy, godetia, statice and scabious can be sown in beds and borders throughout the garden. Just a few packets of seeds could easily fill a complete garden with blooms. First kill any small annual weeds with Weedol 2. Just dissolve the blue granules in a watering can and wet the weed foliage. Just wait until the liquid is dry on the leaf, usually half an hour will do, and you can then rake the surface to make a fine 2cm (1in) layer of top soil. If you sow the seed finely along shallow straight drills your flowers will come up in rows, and you will more easily spot the difference between your wanted plants and any new weeds.

TOPICAL TIP

Continue to spray roses using any RoseClear 3 products you have stored in your shed. Sprays in the spring will kill any greenfly and give great protection against blackspot, mildew and rust.

PATIO

After the wettest winter in many years, shaded areas of paved patios are displaying a slimy green mould, moss and algae that are not only unsightly but also very slippery. You could hire a high pressure sprayer to jet it off, but that does destroy the surface of the paving, making it vulnerable to pock marking by future rains and frost. If you want a thorough muscle work out (equivalent to 2 hours in the gym) then find a stiff yard brush and get scrubbing. But anyone can clear away all these green moulds, moss and algae without any hard work. Just water on Patio Magic and the job's done. Simply dissolve in a watering can and wet an otherwise dry patio. You will start to see the results in just a few days and the killing effect goes on for several weeks so that your patio will be clean and safe ready for summer activities. There's no bleach, no scrubbing and no hard work. While you've got some diluted liquid in your watering can, you can also treat green moss and algae that may be growing on vertical walls or fences, where it is just as effective if a little more difficult to get wet. For vertical surfaces you will make application much easier if you spray the diluted Patio Magic in your garden sprayer.

TOPICAL TIP

Plant up dahlia tubers in individual pots of Miracle-Gro All Purpose Growing Compost and keep in a frost-free place while they put on fresh new growth. You will then have strong new plants ready to plant out into patio pots or garden borders towards the end of May.

LAWN

It really must be spring as you can now hear the sounds of mowers on the move every Sunday morning and smell one of our favourite perfumes – the scent of new cut grass. For a great summer lawn cut your grass frequently, but not too short. A weekly trim now, gradually reducing the height of cut in May so that it gets down to it's minimum length of 2cm (1in) for summer parties.

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, dark 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 such as EverGreen Complete, will make a miraculous difference. The unique formula greens the grass in just 7 days, kills the moss and weeds plus it improves water absorption. By building a thick, green lawn with stronger roots the grass plants can better absorb water and nutrients. This helps protect your lawn against heat, drought and other stresses.

It's easy to apply to the average sized lawn through the built-in hand spreader that makes lawn treatment as easy as walking. It applies the granules evenly and accurately straight from the pack so there's nothing to handle, measure or muck about with. For larger lawns over 100 sq. m (120 sq. yards) you will need to buy a bag of 4-in-1 product and consider investing in a wheeled spreader to make the application quick and easy. For products containing weedkiller your best choice for even results would be the Scotts EvenGreen Drop Spreader. It is adjustable, so you can apply grass seed, lawn sand and Scotts and EverGreen lawn granules accurately over the whole lawn without handling the material. It's easy and quick to use. There's an on/off grip handle so starting and stopping the application of the granules is easy and accurate when you get to the end of a strip. And because the lawn treatment granules drop vertically from the bottom of the hopper it is ideal for applying moss control and weed killing treatments as there is little chance of the granules harming wanted plants growing in adjacent beds and borders.

TOPICAL TIP

Use a pair of edging shears to cut the vertical growth of grass around the edges. A clean delineation between the straight lines or curves of the lawn and the surrounding soil borders will make the lawn look even smarter.

VEGETABLES

April is a busy month because seeds of most crops can be sown now. Hardy crops can be sown directly into the soil of your veg patch, while tender ones need to start their life indoors on a windowsill.

First the hardy ones that include among others, broad bean, beetroot, pea, parsnip, cabbage, spinach, sprouts, and leeks. Simply improve the soil with Miracle-Gro Soil Improver or Levington Farmyard Manure and then bury the seed to the right depth and spacing according to the instructions on the packet. Vegetables that are sown in a seed bed and later transplanted to their cropping position at the seedling stage include leeks and all the cabbage family. For root crops such as carrots don't add any rich farmyard manure to the soil as this could encourage the roots to divide (called fanging) into many small roots instead of one useful root that is good for the kitchen.

Other seeds produce plants that are susceptible to damage from any frost between now and the middle of May. These tender plants include marrows, courgettes, tomatoes, dwarf French beans and sweet corn. So that you have largish seedlings to plant out in May it's time to sow seeds now, depending on the room you have to protect them from frosts.

Complete the planting of maincrop potatoes around the middle of the month. You can avoid too much scab on the new tubers by adding plenty of organic matter into the trench on top of the potato seed. Well rotted compost from your own heap will

work well or you can buy bags of Soil Improver that is likely not to contain as many weed seeds.

If you want to grow your veg in raised beds you can buy all manner of wooden frames and wicker baskets in which to grow vegetables so they look as pretty as your flower borders. They also have a practical purpose, because it is much quicker and easier to improve your existing soil. For a productive as well as a decorative raised bed, incorporate Miracle-Gro Gro Your Own Soil Improver 50:50 with your existing soil.

TOPICAL TIP

If you can keep weeds under control while they are still small, you will save yourself heaps of time and effort in killing them after they have developed large roots. Hoeing the tops off may mean the roots can re-grow again, but spraying the foliage with Weedol Rootkill Plus means the whole plant is killed, even the roots, so they don't come back.

FRUIT

If you haven't previously fed your fruit bushes, trees and canes, then it's time to complete the job as they all burst into new growth. For more fruit and stronger growth I would recommend Miracle-Gro Gro Your Own Fruit & Vegetable Plant Food. It's a unique natural plant food that will steadily feed all your home grown fruit and vegetables for up to 8 weeks using recycled organic and naturally occurring materials.

These balanced plant food granules are rich in the main three nutrients to encourage strong stem and leaf growth, sturdy root development and maximum fruit formation.

Applied in spring to improve soil fertility it should be sprinkled around established fruit trees or bushes or scattered over recently prepared ground to enrich soil just before planting strawberry plants. Made with 100% natural ingredients, this plant food is ideal for all fruit including tomatoes, peppers, strawberries, blackcurrants and raspberries. It encourages excellent leaf colour in cabbages, lettuce and herbs and strong root growth that will benefit crops of carrots, radish, parsnips and other root vegetables. Best of all it will encourage fast, tender growth that gives optimum taste.

Small garden birds find the new buds produced by blackcurrants and gooseberries a great tea-time treat. To prevent them stripping the buds cover the bushes with netting held above the growth with canes.

Another common pest of fruit is the sap-sucking aphid. In warm spring weather greenfly and blackfly are attracted to the soft new foliage and you need to check fruit plants every week so you can spot the first signs of attack. When they are first noticed, spray the pests with either ready-to-use BugClear Gun! for Fruit & Veg (pyrethrins) or, if you have a lot of plants to treat, the concentrate BugClear for Fruit & Veg (rape seed oil) that you mix with water in your garden sprayer. Both of these treatments contain natural occurring insecticides that are fast acting and can be used on all edible crops without delaying harvest by more than one day.

TOPICAL TIP

All stone fruit should be pruned when they are actively growing rather than when they are dormant. Now is a good time to prune cherry trees if branches are overcrowded or the bush is trained in a fan shape.

ALWAYS READ THE LABEL. USE PESTICIDES SAFELY

BugClear™ Gun!™ for Fruit & Veg contains pyrethrins. BugClear™ for Fruit & Veg contains rape seed oil. EverGreen® Complete contains MCPA, mecoprop-P and ferrous sulphate. Patio Magic^ contains benzalkonium chloride. SlugClear™ Advanced Pellets and SlugClear™ Concentrated Liquid contain metaldehyde. Weedol® 2 contains paraquat. Weedol® Rootkill Plus™ contains glyphosate and pyraflufen ethyl.

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