

Scotts Gardening Diary

March 2009

Indoors hyacinths will be making a perfumed show and gardens now hold all the promise of another beautiful year. Crocus, iris and some early daffodils will be providing great colour in the garden and new leaves will be emerging from shrubs and trees. The key job that galvanises that spirit of optimism is to feed existing shrubs, roses and flowers ready for the rush of new growth. Depending on the suitability of the soil it's also time for seed sowing, planting and lawn maintenance.

LAWN CARE

After a cold, dark winter with plenty of rain and heavy cloud cover, the grass is likely to be in a poor state whereas you will notice that moss will have had ideal conditions to spread into bare patches and to colonise the soil surface. This is a great time to deal with the invader, and at the same time stimulate the grass into action.

Start by mowing the lawn and at the same time checking what conditions you find under foot. Choose a dry day when frost is not present. You are almost certain to find great colonies of moss, especially in low lying and shaded areas.

To put it bluntly the grass needs to be fed, the moss killed and to have the drainage improved over the whole lawn. The first two are easily achieved with a single dose of Scotts Lawn Builder Lawn Food plus Moss Control. The moss will usually start to die in just a few days and the grass will green up in a week. After a fortnight the moss will have turned brown and needs to be raked out and disposed of in the green recycling bin or council collection point.

That's the easy bit. Now comes your early spring work out to improve the drainage. Get an ordinary garden fork and drive the tines into the soil every 10cm (4 inches) making holes that are at least the same depth. These holes will allow air into the soil and encourage excess water to drain away from the surface.

For a de-luxe finish you can also fill in these holes with a fine soil that will ensure the drainage improves year on year. Buy a few bags of EverGreen Enriched Lawn Soil and brush the material into the holes and into any hollows that have occurred on the lawn.

TOPICAL TIP

Cut the edges of the lawn to give a sharp line between grass and the surrounding border. A half-moon edging iron is the traditional way to a neat edge at the beginning of the season, but if used too often your lawn area will tend to shrink away.

GARDEN BORDER

Rose pruning is said by many to be one of the most daunting jobs in the garden, just because they are frightened they may harm the plants. But the alternative of no pruning creates an untidy, shapeless bush that only flowers on the top of tall stems. It's much better for your garden and your roses to take up the secateurs and get hacking. For novices and daunted gardeners the first thing to understand is that good pruning is relatively easy and bad pruning is rarely the cause of a disaster. Assuming your rose bush is established, you are unlikely to do it any harm. So let's look forward in a positive way to hacking back an overgrown rose bush.

First take out any dead or very weak branches using a pruning saw or long-handled pruners. Then cut back the remaining long stems with a sharp pair of secateurs. If you are not too sure of the vigour of the plant cut the stems back at various heights. Hard prune one or two stems so they are about 15cm (6 in) tall, a couple more so they are 30cm (12 in) tall and the remainder cut back to half their existing height. In this way you can do no wrong and with adequate feeding encourage new strong shoots to develop from the crown area of the plant. On each stem find a leaf joint mark that is facing outward and make a sloping cut that finishes about 1cm above that mark. Encouraging new stems that grow outwards will provide good air circulation, few crossings of stems and a more vigorous plant.

When you have finished pruning, clear away the old stems and all the old rose leaves that have fallen to the ground. Make a note if any carry the tell-tale signs of rose blackspot disease. If they do you must make a note to spray the new leaves as they unfurl with a systemic fungicide such as FungusClear Ultra a few weeks hence. Only by regular spraying as a preventative measure can you hope to prevent your roses suffering from this crippling disease that disfigures the foliage and causes premature leaf drop.

Feeding your roses and other shrubs in spring is essential if they are to be strong and healthy this year. The 1 kg shaker jar of Miracle-Gro Slow Release Rose & Shrub Plant Food will feed your plants for a whole season from one spring-time application. Balanced nutrients and magnesium are released slowly throughout the next six months to help produce richly coloured blooms with greener foliage and excellent fragrance. If you prefer to use a more natural plant food then Miracle-Gro Organic Choice All Purpose Plant Food is chemical free and provides balanced nutrients from natural sources.

All the flower seeds you sowed earlier will need to be transplanted into trays or individual pots or cells so they have more space to grow bigger. For best results use a potting compost such as Levington John Innes No.2, Miracle-Gro All Purpose Growing Compost or Levington Container & Hanging Basket Compost.

Protect the new growth of delphiniums, hostas and other vulnerable herbaceous plants with a liquid slug killer. Water SlugClear over and around these decorative plants to kill off the hidden slugs and snails that will be attracted at night to the succulent new growth. If you prefer the power of pellets then sprinkle SlugClear Advanced Pellets thinly as directed on the pack around the plants you want to protect.

TOPICAL TIP

Feed spring bulbs during and after flowering with a water-soluble general plant food applied over foliage and around roots. This will encourage plump bulbs to form for the following year's display.

PATIO GARDENING

Your garden centre will be full of tiny pots each containing rooted cuttings from tender plants such as geraniums, osteospermums and fuchsias. Most of these plants come in many different shades of colour and markings and it is worth taking trouble selecting ones that go together if you are planning to grow mixed containers of different plant types.

You may also find some other conservatory exotics such as the glory bush (*tibouchina*) angel trumpets (*brugmansia*) abutilon and paper flower (*bougainvillea*) that will eventually bloom in individual pots on the patio later this summer. All will need warmth and light to grow into

flowering sized shrubs, so keep them indoors until the last frost is over, towards the end of May.

Most of these rooted cuttings will be sold to you in small pots with limited root capacity and will all need to be repotted so that the roots and stems have space to grow. They all prefer a rich compost that has good drainage such as Miracle-Gro Moisture Control Compost. It will not only feed your plants for up to six months, but will ease your watering schedule because it absorbs twice as much water than ordinary multi-purpose compost. After repotting, label them clearly and keep the plants out of direct sunshine for a few days until they have settled into their new home.

Treating your gravel drives and paths with a residual weedkiller will not only get rid of the existing weed population, but will help to prevent newly germinating seeds from taking hold. One simple application of Pathclear should prevent regrowth for up to 3 months. You can buy Pathclear Weedkiller PC in ready-measured sachets that will treat 10 square metres each, but for treating large areas the new liquid concentrate called Pathclear Weedkiller LC gives just the same residual action, but it is slightly easier to mix up in volume.

For the gardeners who just can't be bothered with all the hassle of mixing weedkillers up in a watering can or sprayer Pathclear Gun! Weedkiller is pre-prepared. This weedkiller is ready-to-use and comes in either small hand sprayers for easy spot application or up to 5litres of material for treating larger areas.

TOPICAL TIP

Continue to sow seeds of tender bedding plants such as busy lizzies, petunia, verbena and French marigolds so that you have plenty of young plants for use in patio pots, window boxes and hanging baskets in May.

VEGETABLE AND FRUIT GROWING

It's all hands to seed sowing now that spring is on the horizon. For a reliable early crop, some vegetables such as beetroot, broad beans and onions deserve to be sown indoors ready to plant out the seedlings come early April when the soil has become warmer. To avoid the fiddle of transplanting onions and beetroot, buy some modular trays that have scores of smallish cells in which you can carefully sow a seed or two. Use a fine compost such as Levington Seed & Cutting Compost that will fill the cells easily and water the compost before sowing the seed. A thin covering of more compost sieved on the top will help germination. Sow the broad bean seeds in individual 3 inch pots using the same quality compost.

Root vegetables such as carrots and parsnips need to be sown where they are to mature. For full details of how to grow root vegetables go to www.lovethegarden.com website and visit the It's Gro Time pages where you will find all you need to know for a reliable crop of carrots and parsnips.

Before sowing seeds get rid of newly germinating weeds using one of the Weedol MAX weedkillers that will show visible effects in 1 hour. For large areas there is a liquid concentrate that can be quickly diluted in a pressure sprayer or a ready-to-use Weedol Gun! MAX to suit the area you need to treat. Just leave for a day for the fast and effective weedkiller to show its working and then rake in some additional plant food. A dressing over the area to be seeded with Miracle-Gro Organic Choice Fruit & Vegetable Plant Food will

raise the nutrient levels of your soil so that the newly emerging crops will put on fast growth. Simply rake it in before making shallow drills for your seeds.

Feed all fruit early in spring so that roots can draw on valuable nutrients whenever they come into active growth. While most gardeners treat fruits such as gooseberries, strawberries and raspberries to a yearly feed, few seem to give apples and pear trees any extra feeding at all. Which is why the crop from many apple trees is poor or intermittent. To encourage apples, pears and plums back into growth give them a spring treat by dressing the soil under the spread of the branches with Miracle-Gro or Osmocote Controlled Release Plant Food at a handful per square metre.

Where fruit trees are growing in the lawn cut back the grass to reveal bare soil below the branches. You will then be able to feed the soil, work over the surface to dig in the fertilizer and then mulch the surface with a decorative bark such as Miracle-Gro Moisture Control Natural Pine Bark to retain moisture and help prevent weed seedlings.

For an early crop of strawberries feed the plants now with Miracle-Gro Organic Choice Fruit & Vegetable Plant Food and cover with cloches to encourage flowering without frost damage.

TOPICAL TIP

Cover redcurrants and other fruit bushes with netting to prevent hungry birds from stripping the buds.

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Always read the label. Use pesticides safely.

BugClear Ultra for Pots contains acetamiprid. FungusClear Ultra contains triticonazole. Pathclear Weedkiller PC and Pathclear Gun! Weedkiller contains glyphosate, oxadiazon and diflufenican. Pathclear Weedkiller LC contains glyphosate and diflufenican. Scotts® Lawn Builder® plus Moss Control contains ferrous sulphate. SlugClear™ and SlugClear™ Advanced Pellets contain metaldehyde. Weedol® MAX™ and Weedol® Gun!™ MAX contain pelargonic acid.

We recommend you always wear gloves when gardening.

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