

March Gardening Diary

Officially it's the first month of spring and we now have plenty of opportunities to start serious gardening. There's the vegetable patch to prepare, seeds to sow and the flower border to plan. Getting some jobs completed in March is one way to ensure your garden work doesn't overwhelm you. Here are a few ideas for a plan of action that will get you a few steps ahead of the crowd.

DECORATIVE GARDEN

Spring bulbs will be starting to bloom with crocus, daffodils, hyacinths, dwarf iris and anemone blanda heading the rush for a bright colour display. Most people forget to feed bulbs and are surprised when the flower power of bulbs diminishes over the years and eventually fades away. A general feed with a granular plant food will ensure the bulbs and the surrounding plants are well fed while they are actively growing. Try Miracle-Gro Bulb Booster for long-term feeding. It is a slow release granule that gradually releases its nutrients over a period of 3 months. Just what they need!

It's time to complete the pruning of rose bushes, cutting stems back by two thirds to an outward facing bud. This will keep the bush within bounds and encourage new stems that will carry many more beautiful blooms. Feeding is also a vital part of rose care. Without it vigour and the power to bloom will soon diminish. A dressing of Rose 'Plus' or Miracle-Gro Slow Release Rose & Shrub Food is all that your plants will need. Both are rich in balanced nutrients to encourage greener leaves, top quality blooms and healthy growth.

Many shrubs and herbaceous plants we grow in modern gardens are borderline hardy. Many have been imported from warmer climates and proved to be strong enough to survive in an average UK winter. Unfortunately, December 2010 was the coldest December for 100 years. In central England they had the second coldest December since 1659. The temperatures fell to minus 18 degrees centigrade somewhere in the UK on 10 nights of the month. Now that's really cold.

TOPICAL TIP

Sow sweet peas in pots of Multi-Purpose Compost and keep in a sheltered spot where a temperature around 12 degrees C (55F) can be easily maintained. These perfumed climbers do not appreciate root disturbance, so sow three or four seeds to each 4 inch pot and plant out the clump in late spring.

SEED SOWING

It's the most exciting time in gardening when there are plenty of seeds that need to be sown – all you need is the room to grow them. Hardy annual flower seeds including larkspur, love-in-a-mist, godetia, calendula, pansy, poppy and alyssum can be sown directly in the soil where they are to flower. That means no pots, seed trays, pricking out or re-potting. It's dead easy and dead cheap. Wait until the soil has warmed up and rake in some soil conditioner to provide a friable seed bed.

Towards the end of March or the beginning of April you can scatter the seeds in bold patches out in the garden, but this makes it difficult to spot the wanted seedlings from the inevitable weeds. For easier recognition make straight furrows in the soil and sow seeds thinly in these rows. Cover with a little more soil and wait for them to spring into life. You can use this method for hardy vegetables such as carrots, parsnips and leeks although for large plants such as cabbage and sprouts you will need to transplant the seedlings so they have enough space to flourish.

Many other seeds can't survive the low night temperatures of March and April and need to be grown indoors until frosts are over in May. Tender flowering plants that fall into this 'half-hardy' category include begonia, busy lizzy, petunia, salvia, tagetes and verbena. Tender vegetables include tomatoes, runner beans, sweet corn and the marrow family.

For these tender plants, you need to sow in large pots or seed trays filled with a good compost such as Levington or Miracle-Gro Seed & Cutting Compost. For maximum germination follow the directions on the packet as to covering seeds and the temperatures required.

PATIO GARDENING

Towards the end of the month if the weather has turned mild, it's time to plant up summer flowering bulbs, corms and tubers such as dwarf gladioli, freesias, ixia and ranunculus. Many gardeners that have heavy clay soil find that growing them in pots is much more successful as containers allow them to be planted in the well drained compost that they love. To ensure moisture holding and good drainage use Levington John Innes No 3 and add a layer of sharp sand immediately under the corms of gladioli as they need extra help to prevent rotting.

It's time to feed shrubs, trees and roses growing in pots and containers so they can put on strong early growth. Trying to remember to feed every 10 to 14 days is always a bit difficult and that is why many people are switching to slow release plant foods that will gradually feed potted plants for up to six months from the initial spring application.

Carrots such as Early Nantes can be grown in large containers from seed to cropping when placed in a sunny position on the patio. There are several benefits. A warmer position on the patio will encourage early growth that can easily be protected by fleece if we get a cold spell of weather. Growing in an organic multipurpose compost also allows the roots to grow straight and strong without the forking of roots when they hit a stone or two inevitably found in open soil. The only thing I would recommend is to grow them in a deep plastic container rather than a terracotta pot, as the swelling roots of carrots will easily crack open a terracotta pot as the roots swell sideways.

LAWNS

Grass cutting needs to start this month in mild areas of the country to trim back untidy growth. If you rake the lawn first you will not only pull out any harmful debris that may have hidden away overwinter, but this will also encourage the stems to stand up straight so they are shortened by the mower. The first cut should be on a high setting so that it just trims back some of the stem. You can gradually reduce the height of cut in subsequent mowings which will gradually increase from once a month to once a week.

After the first cut, it's worth checking over for the introduction or spread of moss. During the cold, wet winter this plant gets just the right conditions to encourage strong growth, while in comparison grass remains dormant and can soon be swamped by bright green moss. There are several different causes that encourage the return of moss to a lawn - poor drainage, heavy shade, a compacted surface and underfeeding will all have an effect. So see if you can alleviate these in the first place.

Spiking the surface with a garden fork will help to improve drainage and reduce compaction. If this is a major problem you may think that it is worth buying or hiring a hollow-tine fork that removes plugs of soil. The resulting holes can be filled with a 50:50 mixture of sharp sand and EverGreen Lawn Soil so the holes don't fill in, but encourage new roots and excellent drainage.

Now it's time to sort out the starvation problem with a dressing of Scotts Lawn Builder plus Moss Control that contains ferrous sulphate to burn off the mosses and plant foods to green up and invigorate the grass. After a week or so the moss will turn dark brown and can be raked off. Recycle this debris through the municipal system as it will take an awful long time to rot down if placed on your own domestic compost heap.

When the moss has been removed you may well find that there are bare patches which will need to be reseeded. For a really quick job, cover the affected area with a thin layer of Miracle-Gro Patch Magic! This mixture of grass seed, coir compost and long-lasting lawn food will ensure new grass gets established thickly and your lawn is soon returned to its previous glory.

TOPICAL TIP

Tidy up the edges of the lawn with a half-moon cutting tool or long-handled shears to provide a really sharp divide between the grass and the surrounding borders.

VEGETABLE GARDEN

There are plenty of vegetables that can be sown in March to provide early crops of tasty food. Broad beans and peas can be sown straight in the ground, although I prefer to sow them individually in cells or pots full of multi-purpose compost from Levington or Miracle-Gro. Because the planted seeds can be kept in a cold frame or sheltered sunny position I find germination is always quicker compared to open soil. The seeds are also protected from mice and other animals that tend to dig up these nutritious food sources if planted directly in the soil.

Root crops such as carrots and parsnips are normally sown directly in the soil as soon as sunshine and mild temperatures have prepared the soil. Before sowing the seed thinly in rows it is advisable to nourish the soil with Fruit & Vegetable Plant Food and rake into the top 3cm (1in) of soil.

There's still time to plant out crowns of asparagus in prepared trenches, although it will be a couple of years before the plants are established well enough for you to cut spears for eating. This is a long term investment in time and space as the plants should be able to crop for up to fifteen years before they need replacing. Take some trouble over the planting and you will be rewarded with a tasty spring treat for years to come. Pick a sunny spot where the soil is well drained and dig out a trench 30cm wide and 20cm deep. Dig over the bottom of the trench after adding plenty of Levington Soil Conditioner or Farmyard Manure to improve organic content and drainage. Create a dome shape of soil along the trench so the spider legs of the crown are spread out and downwards as they reach the edges of the trench. Cover the roots and the crown with 5cm of soil and as the shoots emerge continue earthing up the trench until you reach normal soil level.

TOPICAL TIP

Continue to pick purple sprouting broccoli regularly to encourage new side shoots. Dig the last of your leeks – if left in the ground too long they produce flower stems in the centre that are too hard to eat.

FRUIT GARDEN

Birds can be a problem on some soft fruit, particularly attacking the unprotected buds of gooseberries. If you have seen this problem before the only answer is to net the bush with material stretched taut between canes well away from the stems. Similar action is not practical if you are protecting the buds of cherries, plums and pears grown as half standard

trees. Perhaps the only solution here is to provide the attackers – usually sparrows and bullfinches – with enough wild bird food that they aren't hungry.

There is still time to plant out new canes of raspberries in the garden or on the allotment. For an assured crop this year, choose an autumn fruiting variety such as Autumn Bliss that flowers on new growth produced in the same year. You won't be disappointed as you will find that if well fed these raspberries will provide tasty fruits from August until well into October. Take some trouble to plant in a rich organic soil that has been improved with Levington Farmyard Manure or Soil Conditioner plus a good handful or two of Miracle-Gro Fruit & Vegetable Plant Food.

All fruit trees and bushes will grow more strongly and fruit more abundantly if they are given a spring feed of organic plant food at this time of the year as new buds, flowers and foliage are being produced. For summer soft fruits such as strawberries, blackcurrants and raspberries the best food is one such as Miracle-Gro Organic Choice Fruit & Vegetable Plant Food. But for autumn fruiting plants such as apples, pears and figs a slow release plant food that releases nutrients for up to six months will provide longer term feeding and a healthier plant. Miracle-Gro Controlled Release Plant Food comes in a large 2kg bucket, so you should have a lot of plant food left over to also feed roses, shrubs and vegetables.

TOPICAL TIP

Blueberries are ericaceous and appreciate a feed of Miracle-Gro Azalea, Camellia and Rhododendron Plant Food each spring to supply all the nutrients that are needed for strong growth and an easily absorbed form of iron to keep the foliage dark green and healthy.

Use plant protection products safely. Always read the label and product information before use.

Scotts® Lawn Builder plus Moss Control contains ferrous sulphate.

®, ™ and Plus, Levington and Miracle-Gro are Trade Marks of The Scotts Miracle-Gro Company LLC or its affiliates.

The Scotts Miracle-Gro Company
Salisbury House, Catteshall Lane, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XE. Tel 0845 190 1881