

Probably the busiest month of the gardening calendar, when most of us plant out tender bedding plants, summer seeds and vegetable plants such as beans and tomatoes. Established roses, shrubs and herbaceous plants will soon be in bloom and weeds will be running riot in any bare patch of soil. It's difficult to keep on top of everything, so here are a few guidelines for the most important jobs that need tackling in May.

DECORATIVE FLOWER BORDERS

Garden Centres will be full of tender bedding plants from the end of April and some gardeners plant them in the garden immediately, gambling that there won't be any late frosts in their area to kill them off. Some years they are lucky and they have a really early flush of colour from geraniums, busy lizzies, petunias and fuchsias. In other years, late frosts can occur up to the end of May in some areas of the south and they are not unknown in June in Scotland.

Early planting of tender bedding plants is OK if you are prepared to watch the weather forecast for your area and have sheets of newspaper to fix over the plants every evening in May should frosts be predicted.

Don't be fooled by any plant label that claims it is 'half hardy'. That is gardening speak that really means 'not hardy at all' - so beware. After you have bought your bedding plants keep them for a week or more outside in their pots or trays to harden off. Up until now these tender plants will have been kept in a heated greenhouse, so they need some time to toughen up the inevitable soft foliage and to get acclimatised to colder nights. A position close to the house on a warm patio is ideal as bricks and paving hold heat for many hours. A covering of newspaper or fleece will ensure the plants are tucked up safely on cold nights when ground frosts are predicted.

When planting out bedding, give the plants a thorough watering in the trays or pots the night before planting so they have had a good drink ready for root disturbance and the trauma of new surroundings. Select your plants for the conditions your garden offers. In shady spots busy lizzies and fibrous rooted begonias will thrive without too much direct sun. So too will pansies, Canterbury Bells, lobelia and coleus. In hot, sunny spots plant those that are more tolerant to drought conditions including geraniums, petunias, verbena and Californian poppy.

All of the plants will appreciate a rich organic soil that has had some Miracle-Gro Soil Improver dug in before planting. This will improve the structure and help the retention of water and nutrients. To ensure the roots can draw on ample plant foods, scatter a handful or two of Rose Plus or Miracle-Gro Slow Release Plant Food over each square yard of soil and rake in.

Take out small planting holes with a trowel, leaving space between each for potential plant growth. Firm soil around the roots with your fingertips and leave a shallow depression on the surface around the stem so that any subsequent watering puddles just above the plant roots without running away.

The initial watering in of these new plants is best done with a solution of Miracle-Gro Plant Food or other soluble plant food so you can feed and water at the same time. By applying the plant food over the leaves and around the roots you will quickly help the plant get over the root disturbance and shock of transplantation. The nutrients that are absorbed in the first week will help the plant send out new roots into your garden soil or compost so that it gets established quickly.

Stake tall growing perennials such as delphiniums, lupins and monkshood early and tie in regularly as the flower stems grow. Remember to put eye guards on top of any canes that you use.

TOPICAL TIP

Plant out tubers of dahlia plants in enriched soil dressed with Miracle-Gro Soil Improver and a good handful or two of Miracle-Gro Slow Release Rose & Shrub Food.

ROSES, SHRUBS AND CLIMBERS

Summer flowering roses and shrubs such as mock orange (Philadelphus), ceanothus, beauty bush (Kolkwitzia) and hebes, plus climbers such as honeysuckle, clematis and hydrangea will be forming buds just before they burst into bloom. These tender buds and the surrounding new foliage are ideal feeding grounds for sap-sucking aphids (greenfly and blackfly) that are on the wing looking for new places to breed. So watch out and spray your affected plants as soon as you see the first culprits with a systemic insecticide such as BugClear Ultra Gun! This new treatment can be used on all decorative shrubs and climbers and gets inside the plant to kill off many different pests including mealy bugs, thrips and caterpillars. It has a long-lasting effect and remains active inside the plant for a couple of weeks to kill any new pests that fly in from neighbouring gardens during that time.

To ensure your clematis display is as good as possible the plant needs moist soil at the roots and warm sunshine on the top growth. To keep the roots cool and moist, water occasionally with diluted Miracle-Gro Soluble Plant Food and mulch the surface of the soil with a thick layer of Miracle-Gro Moisture Control Natural Pine Bark.

Feeding shrubs and climbers during the summer is quick and easy with the benefit of Miracle-Gro Liquafeed. This hose-end dilutor and waterer delivers a wide spray or jet of diluted plant food that is ideal for foliar feeding and root feeding. To avoid scorching tender leaves just use the system in the evening when the sun is not strong enough to damage the foliage.

TOPICAL TIP

Rose care has been made better and easier this year thanks to the introduction of RoseClear Ultra Gun! – a triple action treatment that kills aphids, controls blackspot, powdery mildew and rust. Best of all, it saves time by preventing further attacks, with up to 4 weeks between applications.

LAWN CARE

The warm, bright weather of May will encourage grass to grow really fast and you will need to mow each week if you are to keep your lawn looking in tip top condition. Don't give this valuable resource to the council to dispose of, instead create your own compost bin where you can turn this green waste into rich compost by mixing it with vegetable peelings from the kitchen and cardboard or scrunched up newspapers. It's the mixing of ingredients that prevents the grass cutting turning slimy and smelly, but quick breakdown can also be encouraged with an occasional sprinkling of garden soil and Miracle-Gro Compost Maker.

Many weed seeds that germinate in a lawn are easily controlled with regular mowing. But some low growing weeds such as dandelions, white clover and daisies spread sideways and hide beneath the cutting blades. The easiest way to rid your lawn of these weeds is to treat them with a selective weedkiller such as Verdone Extra Ready To Use. It kills the broadleaved weeds without harming the grass.

Spraying the weeds with the fine spray from the ready-to-use product gives best results as the millions of tiny droplets stick more evenly all over the leaves and allow more active ingredient to get inside the unwanted plant. To ensure there is a large leaf area of weeds to

treat, simply time the application mid way between mowings, say 3 days after the last cut and 3 days before the next one.

Lawn weeds will tend to die slowly, but surely, gradually twisting their leaves and loosing their bright green colour. The first mowing after application must not be used as a mulch, either fresh or after composting since it may damage garden plants. For safety's sake, dispose of grass cutting from this first cut via normal household waste and not through your council composting scheme. In a few weeks the weeds will be dead and you grass will be able to take over the resulting bare patches so all that remains is smooth, thick grass.

TOPICAL TIP

If your grass is growing strongly but not very green it deserves a dressing of EverGreen Cut & Feed, a spring fertilizer that promises to make your lawn visibly greener in just 3 days.

PATIO GARDENING

Hanging baskets of summer flowers may not be as fashionable as they used to be, but they do make a spectacular statement next to front doors and beside patio dining areas. The age-old saying that "eye-level is buy level" hasn't changed and these spectacular waterfalls of colour, many dripping flower colour to a length of two metres, make a really colourful statement. Plus you will get colour from the end of May through until the first frost in October.

Some people prefer to grow multi-coloured baskets to show off the wide range of colours that can be squeezed into one container. I prefer to have one variety of plant to make a bigger one colour statement. One vigorous fuchsia Thalia plant may be sufficient to fill a basket, but you will need three or four petunia plants and perhaps half a dozen Impatiens to create a ball shaped display in just a month.

Younger gardeners find that the daily watering needed by flower filled hanging baskets is a step too far and prefer instead to have patio pots that need watering less often and are more forgiving. It's true that if you fill your containers with a top quality compost such as Miracle-Gro Moisture Control Compost it will absorb twice as much water as an ordinary multi-purpose compost. So your investment in compost will make a big difference. A drip tray underneath each pot will also increase the available water reserves, as this moisture can be taken up during the 24 hours after watering.

Perhaps even easier for all of us are the large window box planters or troughs that have a water reservoir in the bottom of the container. Once established and securely fastened on a wall or fence they can survive for a fortnight or more between waterings and still grow some really spectacular flowers.

Patios are excellent places for growing a wide range of salads, fruit and vegetables. Plant three tomatoes in one Tomorite Giant Planter in late May and you can expect to pick many kilos of ripe, tasty fruit before the end of summer. Similarly if you have a sunny space you can grow bell peppers, chilli peppers and aubergines in pots or Miracle-Gro Fruit & Vegetable Planters.

Best guaranteed crops are the lettuce and tasty salad leaves such as rocket, mizuna, land cress, frisee and chervil. Grown in containers in a Miracle-Gro all Purpose Growing Compost instead of directly in border soil, your leaves of rocket will be less likely to be affected by the ugly holes drilled by flea beetles.

VEGETABLES

There are plenty of vegetable seeds to be sown now that we are in May. For convenience they can be divided up into the ones grown initially in pots that are then transplanted out into the garden towards the end of the month and ones that are sown directly in the soil.

The tender ones, including sweet corn, runner beans, French beans, squash, courgettes and outdoor cucumbers can't stand cold nights and could be killed if we get a late frost. They are best sown in pots of Miracle-Gro Gro Your Own Seed & Cutting Compost and kept protected indoors until the end of the month when the small seedlings are planted out in the garden.

The hardier seeds that can go directly into shallow drills out in the garden include carrots, lettuce, broccoli, spinach, radish and peas.

Potatoes should be sprouting through the soil in May and are fine while no ground frosts are predicted. To protect the foliage from threatened frost draw a small amount of soil over the leaves. At this stage don't cover with too much soil because you may need to repeat the process a few times if the weather is cold throughout May. Take the soil from between the rows, so you start to earth up the plant and encourage the biggest crop.

At the end of the month buy tomato plants from your local nursery and sufficient Tomorite Giant Planters so you have 3 plants to each grow bag. For small flavourful tomatoes select a variety such as Sungold or Gardener's Delight – for large beefsteak ones go for Marmande – for tolerance to blight disease see if you can try new Ferline. Pick a warm sunny spot in the garden or patio and stake the plants early.

TOPICAL TIP

Whenever you spot seeds germinating or you have recently planted out seedlings scatter some SlugClear Advanced Pellets around them to protect your new plants from fatal damage.

FRUIT

Keep weeds under control around the stems of apples, pears and soft fruit such as raspberries and loganberries. Hoeing is possible around trees, although the shallow roots of gooseberries and raspberries can be damaged by this method of weed control. Instead, it is safer to use a contact weedkiller such as Weedol Gun! Max around bush fruit.

Greenfly on blackcurrants can be very harmful as they twist and disfigure leaves and spread virus diseases. As soon as the first aphid is seen spray with a natural insecticide such as BugClear Gun! for Fruit & Veg.

TOPICAL TIP

Keep an eye out for caterpillars on fruit trees and bushes. Spray affected fruit with BugClear Gun! for Fruit & Veg to kill them off before they attack the plant leaves.

-- ENDS --

Use plant protection products safely. Always read the label and product information before use. BugClear Gun!TM for Fruit & Veg contains pyrethrins. BugClear Ultra Gun! contains acetamiprid. Weedol[®] Gun!TM Max contains pelargonic acid. RoseClear[®] Ultra Gun! contains triticonazole and acetamiprid. SlugClearTM Advanced Pellets contain metaldehyde. Verdone Extra Ready to Use contains MCPA, clopyralid and fluroxypyr.

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