

What to Do in May 2023
Weekly Gardening Timely Tips from
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester County

May 1

Perennials: Divide overgrown fall-blooming perennials. Use the divisions to fill bare spots in the garden if needed or share with friends. Consider new plants to fill gaps in blooming time to help provide continuity for pollinators. Provide an inch of water weekly, inclusive of rainfall. Mulch to conserve water, moderate soil temperatures and suppress weeds.

Flowers: After spring bulbs finish blooming, you can remove (deadhead) the flowers, but don't cut down foliage until it begins to fade to yellow. The leaves help the bulbs make food to store for next year's blossoms.

Fruits and Vegetables: Continue to sow a succession of early crops, such as fast-maturing lettuce, radishes, carrots, beets and dill. Be sure to thin plants that need more space, mulch and water as needed. Remove flower stalks from rhubarb. Before you prepare the soil for the summer crops, remove weeds that have overwintered, those that are going to seed, and new weed seedlings while they are small. Prepare to be diligent about weeding the vegetable garden throughout the season. Weeds vie with veggies and small fruit like strawberries for water, nutrients, and light. Weeds can also support pest insects and vectors disease. If you haven't already done so, prune out dead bramble canes and thin new canes to a recommended spacing: leave 3 to 5 healthy, vigorous canes per liner foot.

Trees and Shrubs: Finish planting balled and burlapped trees and shrubs as soon as possible. Nursery grown woody container plants have a wider planting window than balled and burlapped plants if given sufficient after care, but these also do best planted when temperatures are moderate.

Lawns: If your grass has grown to about 5 inches, you can mow it to a height of about 3½ inches. Grass blades that are taller support deeper roots and thicker growth than shorter grass. If you have flowering broadleaved plants you want to maintain as a "bee lawn," consider mowing every 2 weeks or so. This strikes a balance between flowering plants and grasses, and makes it easier for the bees to find resources than in unmowed grass. Continue to overseed bare and thin spots to get the lawn through summer for aesthetic purposes. Save major renovations until late summer or early fall.

May 8

Perennials: Mums and similar late-flowering plants may be pinched back to about four inches high in spring. Repeated pinching of late flowering perennials until late June or early July promotes bushiness and more flowers. Later pruning may delay flowering. Conversely,

consider thinning disease prone perennials. Thin perennials such as old-fashioned phlox by removing crowded stems at ground level to increase air circulation. This can help to reduce powdery mildew while increasing the size of the flowers.

Flowers: Once the foliage has turned yellow on spring bulbs, it's OK to divide or move them. Alyssum, calendula, dusty miller, pansies, phlox, and other cold tolerant annuals enjoy the cool weather. Wait to plant warm-season annuals until nighttime air temperatures are consistently above 55°F and soil temperature has reached 70°F at a depth of 2 inches. These include browallia, coleus, cosmos, impatiens, marigold, petunia, verbena, zinnias and more. Very tender annuals such as begonia, celosia, cleome, geranium, impatiens, nicotiana, portulaca, salvia and zinnia are best transplanted outdoors after Memorial Day.

Fruits and Vegetables: Don't rush the season with warm weather crops like tomatoes and cucumbers. Unless you are in a very warm location, with soil temperatures above 70°F at a depth of 2 inches, planting early may not be helpful. Cold plants don't put on much growth, if any, and may sustain injury. Warm season vegetables planted later in warm soil can quickly catch up and surpass earlier plantings. If you do plant, make sure the soil is not too wet to be workable after last week's heavy rain. A ball of soil pressed lightly in your fist should crumble a bit when you open your hand.

Trees and Shrubs: Continue to prune azalea, forsythia, rhododendron, viburnum and other spring-blooming shrubs now, before next year's flower buds form. Tie the stems of climbing or rambling roses horizontally, as along a fence. This will encourage plants to produce more flowers than on stems that are tied vertically. Spotted lanternfly nymphs have hatched in New York City. Be on the lookout for this invasive pest to hatch in the Hudson Valley soon. See <https://nysipm.cornell.edu/environment/invasive-species-exotic-pests/spotted-lanternfly/> for information on this pest and how to report sightings.

Lawns: If the grass is growing slowly, you can skip mowing until it reaches approximately five inches in height. At that time, cut off 1/3 of the height of the blades so the grass stands approximately 3½ inches tall. If you have bare spots in the lawn due to construction or other disturbance, consider overseeding with a fast-growing species suited to the site. Repeat as needed. Though it's best to reseed a lawn in early fall, if you leave soil bare, weeds will grow to fill the space. Contact your local Cooperative Extension for details.

Potted plants: Pinch back multi stemmed plants that look thin. Make sure they have adequate light, an appropriate potting mix with adequate fertility, and water.

May 15

Perennials: Young spotted lanternfly nymphs may be found on perennials before they move to trees and other plants. Be on the lookout for this invasive pest. See <https://nysipm.cornell.edu/environment/invasive-species-exotic-pests/spotted-lanternfly/> for information on this pest and how to report sightings.

Flowers: If the soil has reached 70°F at a depth of 2 inches, you can plant tender perennial summer bulbs. These include cannas, crocosmia, dahlias, and gladiolas. Plant very tender perennials such as caladiums and elephant ears around Memorial Day when the weather is consistently warm. When you're filling a hanging basket, window boxes, or other container with plants, use potting mix, not soil from the yard or topsoil. Potting mix is free of weed seeds and is less dense than many ambient soils, allowing roots to grow well and water to drain, which in turn helps to prevent root rot.

Fruits and Vegetables: Harvest individual leaves or thinnings of early crops as they are large enough to use. Greens and salad crops may be harvested whole if they are running out of room, or to make space for future plantings. Keep up with weeding. Herbs planted outdoors typically don't need fertilizer. In fact, too much fertilizer can limit their flavor and potency.

Trees and Shrubs: Needled evergreens vary in their ability to tolerate various types of pruning. Identify the type of plant you have before you remove any growth. Your local Cooperative Extension can help you identify plants and provide pruning information. Hire an arborist to work on large trees.

Lawns: If you are mowing on a 2 week schedule, when the grass has grown to about 5 inches tall, cut it back to about 3½ inches. This regulates the rate of growth and reduces mowing frequency. Grass blades that are taller support deeper roots and thicker growth than shorter grass. Continue to overseed bare and thin spots to get the lawn through summer for aesthetic purposes. (This could be a good time to incorporate low-growing flowering for pollinators. Consider plants such as clover, heal all, creeping thyme and more.) Save major renovations until late summer or early fall. For high maintenance established lawns, consider fertilizing at the end of the month.

Houseplants: You can move pots outdoors for the summer when night temperatures are reliably in the 60s°F. Many houseplants need some shade outdoors or favor only direct morning sun.

May 22

Perennials: Continue to plant and transplant fall-blooming perennials this month. Consider using healthy containerized plants (not pot bound) as the weather warms. These can establish more quickly than transplants that have to regrow their roots. Water as needed; the plants should receive one inch of rain weekly, inclusive of rainfall.

Flowers: If you've been growing flowers by seed, now's the time to harden them off before you plant seedlings in the garden. Gradually expose seedlings to the outdoors before you plant them. Set them outside for up to an hour the first day and protect them from direct sun and wind. Gradually increase their outdoor exposure every day. At the end of a week or so, when the plants are able to remain in full sun all day and spend a warm night outdoors, they'll be ready for transplanting.

Fruits and Vegetables: Warm season vegetables require soil above 70°F to do their best. (Eggplant and other tropical vegetables prefer soil temperatures above 80°F). Don't rush the season if you have a cool microclimate. If you are in a really warm spot, you may begin to direct seed cucumber, squash and melon, and harden off tomato, eggplant and pepper seedlings. Gradually expose seedlings to the outdoors before you plant them. Set them outside for up to an hour the first day and protect them from direct sun and wind. Gradually increase their outdoor exposure every day. At the end of a week or so, when the plants are able to remain in full sun all day and spend a warm night outdoors, they'll be ready for transplanting. Be prepared to protect tender seedlings if temperatures dip. If you're growing vines or other vegetables that need staking, remember to put supports in place before you plant or sow seeds. This will avoid harm to young plants as they grow.

Trees and Shrubs: Shaping hedges may require a few passes. Level the top with a hedge shears. Then cut the side of the hedge at an angle so that the top of the hedge is narrower than the base. This will give the whole hedge better access to sunlight and reduce the chance of thin or leafless areas on the bottom of the hedge. When pruning most evergreens, do not prune back further than the limit of the green foliage.

Lawns: If you're going to apply lawn fertilizer this spring, you can do this now and until approximately Memorial Day. But know that fall is the best time to fertilize, when the grass will use nutrients to store and prepare for winter.

Houseplants: Fertilize houseplants as needed to replace nutrients lost due to increased watering and growth. Use a balanced fertilizer according to label directions.

May 29

Perennials: Continue pinching back asters, mums, and other late-blooming perennials until around July 4. This will help create fullness and density of flowers. You can make more mums by taking a few vigorous cuttings to root in potting mix or vermiculite. Mulch garden beds lightly to preserve precious moisture, and keep up with weeds that pop through.

Flowers: Keep pansies until they wilt in the heat, then replace with colorful, fragrant, and long-blooming summer annuals such as heliotrope or nicotiana. Many annual flowers look great in hanging baskets, planters or window boxes. Use a container mix, not soil from the yard. Container mixes are free of weed seeds and are less dense than many local soils, allowing for aeration, drainage and good nutrient holding capacity that promotes root growth.

Fruits and Vegetables: Set out tomato plants and other heat loving plants now that the danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed. At the same time, put tomato and other vegetable supports in place so you don't harm growing plants trying to do it later. Sow seeds of green beans, greens and other fast-maturing warm-season vegetables throughout the summer so you have continual harvests.

Trees and Shrubs: Newly planted trees and shrubs need sufficient watering during dry periods of spring, summer and fall for up to three (or more) years after planting. The type of soil influences how long it takes for plants to become established. Plants establish quickly in well-drained, rich soils with sufficient fertility, but generally take much longer in poor, dry soils. Provide one inch of water weekly, inclusive of rainfall.

Lawns: Continue to mow on a 2 week schedule to regulate grass growth. When you follow the “ $\frac{1}{3}$ rule,” allowing the grass to reach about 5 inches tall before cutting it back to about 3½ inches, clippings can more easily filter through grass blades and protect the grass crowns. Leave them on the lawn for a natural mulch and to return nutrients to the turf. Remember to “mow high in May, June and July.”

Houseplants: If you’ve moved the houseplants outdoors, make sure they’re protected from wind and direct sun.