

What to Do in the Garden in March 2024

March 2 to 8

Perennials: It is still possible in March to have temperatures that range from a daytime high over 60°F to lows near zero at night. Early spring perennials have begun to grow, and some early flowering hardy bulbs are in bloom. While most of these can handle the cold, they could sustain injury to blossoms and new growth when temperatures plunge quickly from unseasonably warm to sub-freezing conditions. Hardy plant roots and shoots can survive and regrow, but this year's flower buds that sustain injury could be ruined. Keep an eye on the forecast for cold weather (below 20-25°F). Be ready to protect favorite early perennials with a light, easily removable mulch that won't crush tender blossoms (such as lightweight pine boughs) to help minimize injury.

Flowers: Take cuttings of indoor plants now to use as bedding plants in late spring, such as begonia, coleus and plectranthus (spur flower, Cuban oregano, Swedish ivy and relatives), geranium, and others.

Fruits and Vegetables: Harvest root vegetables still in the ground, such as beets, carrots, and parsnips, for use before they sprout new green growth and begin to flower. Flower buds of collards, kale and other cole crops can be used along with the greens, or left to bloom to use for garnishes or forage for bees. Continue to start seeds indoors of broccoli, cabbage and other cool season vegetables grown as transplants.

Trees and Shrubs: Continue to remove dead and storm damaged branches and stems. Finish pruning oaks before new growth begins. Hire an arborist to do bigger jobs safely. Spotted lanternfly (SLF) egg masses may be present on trees and many landscape surfaces. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants. See <https://nysipm.cornell.edu/environment/invasive-species-exotic-pests/spotted-lanternfly/> Report sightings by sending an image to ReportSLF.com and crush as many eggs as you can find. Use a card to scrape them off of surfaces into a sealable bag, squish, and discard in trash.

Lawns: If the ground is not muddy or soggy, you can pick up twigs, leaves and other debris. Check for vole injury that occurred over winter. Plan to reseed bare spots when soil temperatures reach 50°F at a depth of 2 inches.

Houseplants: Houseplants begin to perk up in response to the lengthening days. You can start to water more liberally as new growth appears and apply fertilizer according to label directions if needed. Remove standing water in the pot base and do not let the soil become soggy (unless you are growing a Venus flytrap or other bog plants). A turkey baster designated just for this purpose is useful for removing excess water from the saucers of large pots. Ferns and moisture-loving tropical rainforest plants should be watered when the soil surface feels dry to the touch. Avoid overwatering by allowing the top half inch of soil to dry between waterings for most houseplants. Unless the pot is very small, allow at least an inch of dry soil between waterings for cacti and succulents.

March 9 to 15

Perennials: You can turn an occasionally wet patch fed by the downspout from eyesore to eyeful by planting a rain garden. These gardens, only a few inches deep, hold water for just a day or so. Plants in a rain garden slow the rate of stormwater runoff, help to reduce flooding and erosion, and provide food and habitat for wildlife. Contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice.

Flowers: Pot up seedlings into larger containers as necessary. Keep them under bright lights.

Fruits and vegetables: Are you an optimist willing to take a gamble? If the soil is sufficiently dry and crumbly and you have a cold frame, individual cloches, or a warmer, well-protected area, consider planting small amounts of lettuce, radish, scallion, spinach, and seeds of other hardy greens outdoors now. Hardy peas that need to be trellised can be planted directly in a warmer spot in the garden under a row cover. Weather permitting, you'll have an extra early harvest this spring (and if the weather ends up not cooperating, you won't have lost much). While you are in the garden, look for spotted lanternfly (SLF) egg masses which may be present on trees and many landscape surfaces. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants. See <https://nysipm.cornell.edu/environment/invasive-species-exotic-pests/spotted-lanternfly/> Report sightings by sending an image to ReportSLF.com and crush as many eggs as you can find. Use a card to scrape them off of surfaces into a sealable bag, squish, and discard in trash.

Trees and Shrubs: If the soil is workable and nearing 50°F at a depth of 2 inches, you can begin to plant bare root and dormant deciduous trees if you are willing to protect them from extreme cold (and wind if you have evergreens) if this occurs. Woody plants benefit from at least 8 weeks of cool conditions for roots to begin to get established before heat arrives. If your soil is dry enough to be worked, you may plant your woodies now. Those that prefer spring planting include birch, cherry, dogwood, evergreens, ginkgo, golden rain tree, magnolia, pear, plum, oak, tulip tree and willow, among others. Broadleaved evergreens do best in protected settings.

Lawns: You might see hairy bittercress, dandelion, and other overwintering plants emerging in the lawn as the snow melts. Some of these flowering plants provide an early food source for pollinators, and you can remove them before they begin to produce seed and spread widely.

Houseplants: To recover the natural shape and form of leggy houseplants, carefully prune back stems to healthy out-facing buds. Provide brighter lighting to help promote bushy growth.

General: Learn how to plan for future gardening challenges at the next Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester 2024 Home Gardening Webinar Lecture Series: *Gardening in a Changing Climate*.

Wednesday, April 17, 2024, from 10 to 11 am, remote on Zoom, \$5.

Speaker: Dr. Matthew Aiello-Lammens, Associate Professor in the Environmental Studies and Science Department at Pace University.

For more information, contact westchester@cornell.edu or 914-285-4620. See

https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.cce.cornell.edu/attachments/59393/2023_Home_Gardening_Lecture_Series_1-3-22.pdf?1667500184

March 16 to 22

Perennials: Hardy perennials are available early in many nurseries. These container grown ornamentals may be planted as soon as the soil is drained and workable. Look on garden structures for potted lanternfly (SLF) egg masses, which may be present on trees and many landscape surfaces. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants. See

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Flowers: If the soil pH hasn't been checked within the last few years, do so before undertaking any major planting projects. Cooperative Extension offers soil pH testing for a nominal fee. Contact your local Extension office for information and sampling instructions.

Fruits and Vegetables: Vigorous weeds will compete with vegetables for nutrients, sunlight and water. A two-inch layer of shredded leaves or other light mulch in the garden will do wonders to hold weeds at bay. Don't forget to mulch fruit trees, blueberries, and bramble fruits such as blackberries and raspberries. Remove any dead canes and dead tips on second year bearing canes of blackberries and raspberries. Make the cut about a quarter inch above a healthy outward facing bud.

Trees and Shrubs: Years ago, someone planted a handsome little yew shrub, but now it's huge and unruly, overtaking a picture window, front walkway, whatever. Yews can tolerate drastic, severe pruning (though it may take more than a season for them to fill back in). Once they have reached the desired size, keep them that way with regular yearly pruning. Other types of overgrown shrubs may not be as forgiving. If you're not sure a shrub can handle this type of renewal, contact your local Cooperative Extension for advice.

Lawns: Early spring is *not* the optimal time to fertilize the grass. (Early fall is.) Loading on nitrogen-rich fertilizer now can encourage grass to grow vigorously but weakly and be more susceptible to diseases. If you must fertilize in spring and fall, wait until Memorial Day to do the spring application.

Houseplants: If a plant has outgrown its pot, the temptation is to buy a container big enough so it will never need transplanting again. That's a mistake; plants do poorly when they're swimming in space. Its new pot should be no more than two inches bigger in diameter than the old pot.

General: Tuesday marks the first day of spring this year. See how the timing of the first bud break and first blossoming compares with past years by checking out maps that the USA National Phenology Network compiles at <https://www.usanpn.org/news/spring>.

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March 23 to 29

Perennials: You may be itching to get into the perennial beds and start cleaning them up. Don't rush the season! If the soil is still soggy, wait until drier condition prevail. (If it's dry enough to crumble in your hand when you form a ball, it's ready.) To avoid soil compaction from foot traffic in garden beds, create paths for access and stay on them. Once the weather begins to settle, cut back browned foliage of bishop's hat (*Epimedium* spp.) and other ground covers, taking care not to damage fragile new stems. Remove the old tops of ornamental grasses before new growth appears. Leave at least 6 to 12 inches of hollow stems for cavity nesting bees, and the new growth will hide them.

Flowers: Weather permitting, you may start planting pansies in moist but not soggy garden beds or outdoor pots now. While you're outside, check for spotted lanternfly (SLF) egg masses which may be present on many landscape surfaces. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants. See <https://nysipm.cornell.edu/environment/invasive-species-exotic-pests/spotted-lanternfly/> Report sightings by sending an image to ReportSLF.com and crush as many eggs as you can find. Use a card to scrape them off of surfaces into a sealable bag, squish, and discard in trash.

Fruits and Vegetables: Start seeds of slow-growing vegetables such as eggplant and peppers indoors. Begin to acclimate hardy cool season vegetables to outdoor conditions so they are ready to plant when the garden soil is workable. Prune apple and pear trees when they have thawed out but have not yet bloomed. Wait until after bloom to prune cherries, peaches, and plums.

Trees and Shrubs: If oak trees do not need emergency pruning, hold off until they're dormant in late fall or winter. This will help reduce the spread of oak wilt, a deadly fungal disease with no known treatment. Fungal spores are carried by sap beetles, which are attracted to fresh tree wounds and oozing sap on healthy oaks in spring.

Lawns: If the grass is growing and the ground is dry enough, you may begin to mow. Keep the mower set to cut at three and one half to four inches to encourage a thick, healthy lawn.

Houseplants: Pinch or cut off leaves that are yellow (dying) or brown (dead). They won't be springing back.

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March 30 to April 5

Perennials: Soil conditions and weather permitting, begin planting perennials and making divisions of summer and fall-blooming plants such as asters, chrysanthemums and Japanese anemones. (Divide early bloomers after they flower.) If plants will require staking as they grow, install it now.

Flowers: On a good weather day, sow seeds of hardy annuals directly in the garden this week. These include bachelor buttons, larkspur, California poppies and sweet alyssum.

Fruits and Vegetables: To boost organic matter, you may add a two inch thick layer of compost and work it into the soil. Varieties to sow directly in the garden include beets, Chinese cabbage, carrot, kale, lettuce, mustard, peas, radishes, potatoes, squash, Swiss chard, and turnips. Weeds will try to compete with the vegetables for nutrients, sunlight, and water. A two-inch layer of shredded leaves or other light mulch in the garden will do wonders to hold weeds at bay.

Trees and Shrubs: As new growth appears, prune floribunda, grandiflora, and hybrid tea roses. Prune rambling roses after they flower. Begin removing burlap windbreaks around trees and shrubs. Readjust wire rabbit and vole protection on tree trunks as needed. Once snow is not likely to return, remove solid tree guards that could harbor insects. Finish pruning oak trees within the next few weeks to minimize the chance of oak wilt infection. Spotted lanternfly (SLF) egg masses may be present on trees and many landscape surfaces. SLF is a major agricultural threat that can kill crops (grapes, fruit trees and others) and affect landscape plants. See <https://nysipm.cornell.edu/environment/invasive-species-exotic-pests/spotted-lanternfly/> Report sightings by sending an image to [ReportSLF.com](https://reportslf.com) and crush as many eggs as you can find. Use a card to scrape them off of surfaces into a sealable bag, squish, and discard in trash.

Lawns: Survey the yard for thin and bald spots. If you have trouble growing grass underneath trees, wait until the leaves unfurl to determine how much light reaches the ground. Even shade tolerant grass varieties require a

minimum of four hours of direct light to grow well. If the spot receives less than this, consider a shade tolerant ground cover instead. Contact local Cooperative Extension for advice.

Houseplants: If you get or are given a new houseplant, isolate it from others for a month, so you can periodically check for diseases and insects. This helps to prevent those that were not initially apparent from spreading to other plants.

General: If you start pulling weeds as soon as they sprout, you can prevent flowering and seeds that give rise to hundreds more. Better yet, cover bare soil with an inch or two of leaves or other mulch to prevent latent seeds from sprouting. You'll thank yourself this summer.

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