

This Month in the Garden...

by Peggy Koppmann

It's April. Time to polish up your green thumb, start your spring chores, and envision the joys (and frustrations) of the season ahead. Whether it's April showers or April flowers, we are more than ready to say "Welcome. What took you so long?"

Crossing the Great Divide – Overcrowded plants can be divided in spring to rejuvenate the plant, promote new growth, increase the number of plants, and control their size. The process for dividing depends on the root type. Spreading roots can be pulled apart or cut with a sharp knife; think grasses and tickseed. Daylilies and hostas are examples of clumping roots that are divided by cutting through the crown with a sharp knife or digging forks. Rhizomes such as bearded iris can be split and replanted with the top just above ground level. Handle Baptisia carefully; she doesn't want to be moved or divided. Peonies, Oriental poppies, and Siberian iris are best divided in the fall. Here are two resources to help sort out the right plants and the right process: <https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/dividing-perennials>; <https://extension.psu.edu/dividing-perennials>

Resist Temptation – Gardeners are tempted to fertilize their lawns in spring, whether they need it or not. (The best time to fertilize was last fall.) If you have a thick, dense cover of desirable grass, you do not need a spring feed. If you decide to apply fertilizer, understand the New York State Runoff Law, intended to restrict the use of lawn fertilizers containing phosphorus (P). Don't apply before April 1 to avoid runoff on frozen ground or water-saturated soil. Sweep up any spilled fertilizer to avoid it being washed into storm drains. Use a drop spreader or one with a shield and don't fertilize if heavy rain is expected within two days. You should lightly water the lawn to wash fertilizer off grass blades and into the soil. AND don't apply any fertilizer within 20 feet of a water body. Dive deeper into this at the excellent Cornell Turf Grass Website: <https://turf.cals.cornell.edu/lawn/>

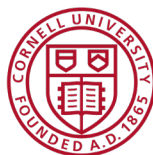
It's Toxic! – As Spring progresses, gardeners often apply a layer of mulch. While mulch has its advantages, beware of toxic mulch, (aka hot mulch, sour mulch). Most problematic are the bagged mulches purchased from local gas stations, hardware stores, and big box stores. If the mulch has a sour, vinegary, pungent smell, you have a problem. Toxic mulch can be the result of poorly processed or stored materials. The mulch contains fermenting organisms in an oxygen depleted environment, resulting in the production of ammonia, alcohol, methane, or acetic acid. Toxic mulch will desiccate plant foliage and tissue. If you find evidence

of toxic mulch, do not use it or remove it if applied. You can spread it on a non-permeable surface and water it for a few days to leach out the toxic chemicals. The literature is unclear about whether it can be used after such a treatment so be aware of the risks.

Decent Exposure – If you are 'leaving the leaves' or other garden debris in your spring garden, be sure to make an exception for plants that need to "be exposed." Tickseed, Shasta daisies, garden phlox, asters, penstemon, and cornflowers are among the plants that have basal rosettes, leaves that are arranged in a circular pattern at the base. This leaf arrangement helps capture sunlight and conserve moisture. Most of these plants stay green to some degree all winter. Foxglove and hens and chicks also fall into this category.

Veggie Vibes- There are an increasing number of vegetable varieties that can be grown in containers. Gardening in a smaller space with no soil-borne disease, less weeding, and easier accessibility are advantages that can't be ignored, especially for gardeners that find the maintenance of a large vegetable garden more difficult. You will need a sunny space with 6 to 8 hours of sunlight, good quality potting soil (not garden soil), and a sense of adventure to produce your own produce. Potatoes, bush cucumbers, lettuce, bush tomatoes ('Tiny Tim'), small bell peppers, radishes ('Cherry Belle'), and spinach ('Little Hero') are a good place to start. Container size can vary but keep in mind that smaller containers will require more watering. An 18" to 24" pot will give room for adequate root development and hold water longer. You'll need to set up a regular fertilizing schedule at two-week intervals using a balanced fertilizer. The seed catalogs are full of varieties to try, and this article will get you off to a good start: <https://www.almanac.com/content/container-gardening-vegetable>

And then... Plant bare-root plants; place plant supports; prune roses when the forsythia blooms; transplant houseplants; weed; fertilize roses; plant pansies and violas; scout for box tree moth and viburnum beetle; clean birdhouses of old nests; sow annual poppies in the garden; sow tomato seeds indoors at midmonth; weed some more; prune raspberry canes; service the lawnmower and sharpen blades; pace yourself – it's a long season ahead.



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