

This Month in the Garden...

by Peggy Koppmann

The merry month of May has finally arrived. After a long wait, it is daunting to think of all the jobs ahead of us, a long list that can seem overwhelming. But the garden has its own schedule, and we need to relax and enjoy the unfolding of the May garden, one that is full of hope and optimism for a wonderful gardening season.

Slimy Things—It's time to go after those soft-bodied mollusks in your garden. Yes, we're talking about slugs and snails and slimy trails. While they are welcome in the compost pile or as food for birds, frogs, and toads, we don't want them around susceptible plants like tulips or delphinium shoots or, (gasp), hostas. You can handpick them, fall back on the beer-in-a-dish trick, or you may consider slug pellets that are pet-friendly. Other approaches involve laying cardboard or boards on damp soil and checking for the critters in the morning. Citrus halves like grapefruit or orange rinds or even coconut halves attract them also. Some sources suggest that coffee grounds will deter slugs. Crushed eggshells scattered around the base of plants also works well as those slimy little guys don't want to crawl over the sharp edges of eggshells. Besides, it could be worse; it could be banana slugs.

Don't Rush Me – Tomatoes originated in South America and were domesticated in Mexico. That alone should tell us that they need warm weather to thrive with soil temps at least in the 60's and nighttime temps in the 50's. If planted before the soil warms up, plants cannot take up phosphorus which is critical to growth and vigor. Patience is the key but if you must push the starting line, try Early Girl, Siberian, or Manitoba varieties. <https://tomatocraze.com/when-and-how-to-plant-tomatoes-outside/> provides a comprehensive look at planting and protection of tomatoes.

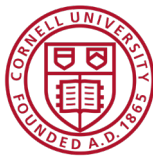
Seedling Success- Before you transplant those beautiful healthy seedlings you raised, they need to be 'hardened off'. This process gradually exposes them to outdoor conditions, strengthens cell walls and improves stress tolerance. Put your seedlings outside each day in a sheltered spot (not direct sunlight) for a few hours, gradually increasing the time each day for 7-14 days. When they are sturdy enough, transplant them on an overcast day or in the late afternoon/evening to avoid heat stress. Make sure you water them before transplanting and handle them by the leaves, not the stems. You put a lot of love and care into raising those babies from, so give them a fighting chance in your garden.

Fertilizing Frenzy – Every plant variety has different needs for summer fertilization. Generally, you can begin fertilizing roses, needle evergreens (acid type fertilizer), annuals and container plants in May. Do your research on appropriate fertilizers and set up a written schedule now. As our summers have become more stressful with increased heat and changing rain patterns, your garden will welcome the extra care but beware of overdoing it. Most native plants do not need any type of fertilization. Here are a couple of places to start: <https://www.almanac.com/how-fertilize-your-vegetable-garden>; <https://johnysfarm.com/how-to-fertilize-perennials/>

Root of the Barbarian – The name of this vegetable, (but legally a fruit in NYS), comes from the Latin word 'rhababarum'. It's been cultivated for over 2000 years for medicinal purposes but do not eat the leaves- they are toxic. It's low in calories, high in nutritional value and can live for up to 20 years in your garden. Late this month, you can begin to harvest the stalks for pie, jams, jellies, and other desserts. Of course, it's rhubarb. Have a slice of pie or rhubarb crisp and enjoy the flavor of May.

High and Dry – Looking for a drought-tolerant, heat-loving, no deadheading, low maintenance plant? Check out the large selection of sedums (stonecrop) available at local nurseries. Often overlooked because they are not in flower during the spring plant shopping season, some sedums are short with cool 'architectural' shapes and colors, while others are tall and bring color and drama to the late season garden. There are many choices beyond the traditional 'hens and chicks' for rock gardens, dry areas, and as ground covers. Many will flower at the end of the season and small pollinators love them. Look for 'White Sedum' or 'Pink Mongolian Stonecrop' for groundcovers or the showy upright 'Thunderhead'. Dark varieties such as 'Black Pearl' provide a wonderful contrast in the garden while fall blooming uprights serve as a food source for migrating Monarch butterflies.

And then...bring houseplants outside when temperatures moderate – but not in direct sunlight; pinch back mums; keep harvesting asparagus; watch for red lily leaf beetles; put up mason bee houses; sow lettuces and radishes; hill up potatoes; deadhead spring blooming bulbs but leave the foliage; prune off lilac and rhododendron blossoms to make way for next year's bud formation; and most importantly, have some ice cream with that rhubarb pie.



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