

What to Do in May 2026

May 3 to May 9

Perennials: Continue to plant and install stakes for perennials that will become tall. Once asters, mums and other late blooming perennials are 6 inches tall or more, pinch them back to 4 inches to increase bushiness and fullness of bloom (this can delay flowering a bit). Stay out of the garden when the ground is wet or when it's raining.

Flowers: If you're buying plants for flower beds, choose compact, bushy seedlings that haven't yet flowered. It's on the early side to plant many warm season annuals. Keep an eye on the weather and bring tender plants indoors at night. In the meantime, get out planters that have been used for a few seasons or may have contained any diseased plant material, and thoroughly clean them. Refill with fresh potting mix.

Fruits and Vegetables: You can still plant carrots, chard, and successions of fast maturing early greens if these can be watered adequately as the weather warms. Check to see if brambles and grapes are properly attached to a trellis or arbor. Use soft ties to attach canes to the supports as needed.

Trees and Shrubs: Continue pruning spring-flowering shrubs (andromeda, azalea, rhododendron, etc.) after they've bloomed. Remove a few of the oldest stems to encourage new growth and those that are very small or thin. Take no more than ¼ to ⅓ of the total growth in a given season.

Lawns: If indicated by a soil test, consider fertilizing around Memorial Day with a slow release fertilizer. A low-maintenance lawn may not need fertilizer more than once per year, if at all, since nutrient cycling may be adequate in well-established turf. Cornell experts advise that fertilizing around Labor Day is preferable to earlier applications for a home lawn. Higher maintenance lawns may be fertilized around Memorial Day and Labor Day if needed.

Houseplants: During especially mild spring days, it might be tempting to stick houseplants outdoors in the sun all day. Don't. They need gradual exposure to the great outdoors, even if you're eventually going to keep them outside this summer. Find a partially shady spot outdoors, leave them there for a few hours, and bring them back inside. Gradually expose them to more time outdoors until they are used to outdoor conditions around Memorial Day or early June.

General: Having issues with animals in your garden? Learn more in the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester 2026 Home Garden Lecture Series: *Structural Defensive Gardening*.

Wednesday, May. 13 from 10 to 11 am, remote on Zoom, \$5. All lectures are remote on Zoom. A ticket to any single remote lecture is \$5 and the tour is \$20 (while there is space).

Speaker: Louis Petralia is a Westchester CCE Master Gardener Volunteer, as well as an attorney, teach ad lawn enthusiast. As a CCE Master Gardener Volunteer, he spends his time working the Demonstration Garden at Hart's Brook Park and Preserve in Hartsdale, NY.

Check out the brochure at [Home Gardening Lecture Tour Brochure](#)

For more information, please call CCE at 914-285-4640, 914-285-4620 or email westchester@cornell.edu

May 10 - 16

Perennials: Continue to plant perennials and install stakes for those that will become tall. Once asters, mums and other late blooming perennials have reached 6 inches or more, pinch them back to 4 inches. This helps to increase bushiness and fullness of bloom (and can delay flowering a bit). Stay out of the garden when the ground is wet or when it's raining to avoid compacting the soil and spreading plant diseases. Young spotted lanternfly (SLF) nymphs may be hatching soon. They are small, black with white spots, and move or jump readily when disturbed. Young SLF nymphs feed on perennials and other herbaceous plants before they are large enough to pierce the bark of woody plants.

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

Fruits and Vegetables: With soil temperatures in the low 50s°F at a depth of 2 inches, you can still plant carrots, chard, and successions of fast maturing early greens if these can be watered adequately as the weather warms. Choose heat tolerant varieties wherever possible. After a warm spell, it may seem ok to plant tender crops, but the weather can be unsettled at this time of year. Even though the air temperature recently reached into the 80s°F in places, soil temperatures are still well below 70°F at a depth of 2 inches that is required for warm season plants to thrive. If peaches and plums have finished blooming, prune them during dry weather. If black knot disease is present, remove the knots, making cuts about 8 inches below the infected growth. Check to see if brambles and grapes are properly attached to a trellis or arbor. Use soft ties to attach canes to the supports as needed.

Trees and Shrubs: Continue pruning spring-flowering shrubs (andromeda, azalea, forsythia, rhododendron, viburnum, etc.) after they've bloomed. Remove a few of the oldest stems to encourage new growth and shoots that are very small or thin. Take no more than ¼ to ⅓ of the total growth in each season.

Lawns: If indicated by a soil test, consider fertilizing around Memorial Day with a slow-release fertilizer. A low-maintenance lawn may not need fertilizer more than once per year, if at all, since nutrient cycling may be adequate in well-established turf. Cornell experts advise that fertilizing around Labor Day is preferable to earlier applications for a home lawn. Higher maintenance lawns may be fertilized around Memorial Day and Labor Day if needed.

Houseplants: If plants have been in the same pots "forever" and the soil is depleted, refresh it with new composted potting mix. Remove an inch or two of the old "soil" around the edge of a pot and fill the space with new mix or repot a plant into a container no more than 2 inches larger than the current pot. Use potting mixes that are formulated for specific types of houseplants.

May 17 - 23

Perennials: Finish dividing overgrown fall-blooming perennials over the next few weeks. Use the divisions to fill bare spots in the garden if needed or share with friends. If invasive jumping worms are present, wash soil off plant roots and replace the plants in clean soil mix before they leave the site. Also consider native plants to fill gaps in blooming time to help provide continuity for pollinators. Provide an inch of water weekly, inclusive of rainfall, for establishment. Lightly mulch to conserve water, moderate soil temperatures and suppress weeds.

Flowers: When buying plants for flower beds, choose compact, bushy seedlings that haven't yet flowered. It's too early to plant many warm season annuals. Keep an eye on the weather and bring tender plants indoors at night. Thoroughly wash planters that were frequently used or filled with diseased plants. Refill with fresh potting mix.

Fruits and Vegetables: Continue to sow a succession of early crops, such as fast-maturing lettuce, radishes, carrots, beets and dill. Thin plants that need more space, mulch and water as needed. Remove flower stalks from rhubarb. 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 linear foot. Wait until the end of the month to plant warm season crops.

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 care, but these also do best planted when temperatures are moderate. Be on the lookout for the invasive spotted lanternfly. See [Spotted Lanternfly | CALS](#) for more.

Lawns: Are you confused about "No Mow May"? Skipping a whole month of mowing could be a disaster for a lawn. Lawn grasses that are not mowed often go to seed, producing thin, tough, and stemmy growth, and may create spaces for weed encroachment. Cutting the lawn to remove no more than 1/3 of the height of the blades at any given time helps to regulate the growth of the grass. This can help to prevent production of grass seed, and encourage better recovery from the stress of mowing, which in turn can support deeper roots and thicker growth. For example, when the grass reaches 4 inches in height, it is cut to 3 inches. Done every 2 weeks or so, this can save time, energy, and money. So, forget "No Mow May" and remember "Mow High in May, June and July" (a good practice for the whole growing season).

Houseplants: During especially mild spring days, it might be tempting to stick houseplants outdoors in the sun all day. Don't. They need gradual exposure to outdoor conditions to move outside. Temperatures are usually sufficiently warm for many houseplants around Memorial Day or early June, but it may be a good idea to protect very tender tropical plants a few more weeks or until night air temperatures are consistently in the high 60s or low 70s°F. Consider the growing information in their native conditions to assess weather preparedness. For gradual exposure, bring plants into a shadier area for several hours at a time. Gradually expose them to more time outdoors until they are used to outdoor conditions, and it's warm enough that they can spend the night outside.

May 24 - 30

Perennials: Continue pinching back mums and similar late-flowering plants to about four inches. 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 up to a third of crowded and thinner stems at ground level. This increases air circulation and can help to reduce powdery mildew while increasing the size of the flowers.

Flowers: Prepare indoor-seeded warm-season flowers by gradually exposing seedlings to the outdoors before planting. Set them outside for up to an hour on 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 can remain in full sun all day and spend a warm night outdoors, they'll be ready for transplanting. Spring bulbs can be deadheaded or moved when plant material yellows.

Fruits and Vegetables: Don't rush the season with warm weather crops like tomatoes and cucumbers. Unless weather is very warm 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.

Trees and Shrubs: Finish up pruning azalea, forsythia, rhododendron, viburnum, and other early spring-blooming shrubs 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. Roses are a preferred host for young spotted lanternfly nymphs, so check the plants regularly.

Lawns: Flowering broadleaved native plants and other nectary plants can be maintained with turfgrass as a “bee lawn.” Research shows that 2 to 3-week mowing intervals allow for the greatest diversity of pollinator species while successfully maintaining lawn flowering. 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.

Potted plants: Pinch back plants that look thin to encourage bushiness. Make sure they have adequate light and are growing in an appropriate potting mix with adequate moisture and fertility. Indoor plants can be moved 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 31 – June 6

Perennials: Spring flowering perennials are glorious at this time of year! Enjoy and keep up with regular scouting for insect and disease presence that may need addressing.

Flowers: If the soil has reached 70°F at a depth of 2 inches, tender summer bulbs like cannas, crocosmia, dahlias, and gladiolas can be planted. Plant warm-season annuals like browallia, coleus, cosmos, impatiens, marigold, petunia, and verbena when nighttime air temperatures are consistently above 55°F and soil temperature has reached 70°F at a depth of 2 inches. Very tender annuals like begonia, celosia, cleome, geranium, impatiens, nicotiana, portulaca, salvia and zinnia are best transplanted outdoors after Memorial Day. When 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: Warm season vegetables require soil above 70°F to do their best – eggplant and other tropical vegetables prefer soil temperatures above 80°F. In particularly warm areas, consider direct seeding cucumber, squash and melon, and harden off tomato, eggplant and pepper seedlings. Gradually expose seedlings to the outdoors before planting. Set seedlings outside for up to an hour the first day and protect them from direct sun and wind, gradually increasing their outdoor exposure every day. When the plants can 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. Remember to put plant supports like stakes in place before the planting or seeding. This will avoid harm to young plants as they grow.

Trees and Shrubs: Needled evergreens vary in their ability to tolerate various types of pruning. Identify the type of plant before removing any growth. When pruning most evergreens, do not prune back further than the limit of the green foliage. Local Cooperative Extension offices can help you identify plants and provide pruning information. Hire an arborist to work on large trees.

Lawns: When grass has grown to about 4-inches tall, cut it back to about 3 inches. Continue to mow on a 2-week schedule to regulate grass growth. When following the “1/3 rule”, clippings can more easily filter through grass blades and protect the grass crowns. Leave cuttings on the lawn for a natural mulch and to return nutrients to the turf. Remember to “Mow High in May, June and July.” If needed by soil testing, lawn fertilizer can be

applied now. Fall is the best time to fertilize, especially for lower maintenance lawns, when the grass uses the nutrients to store and prepare for winter.

Houseplants: If houseplants are outdoors, make sure they're protected from wind and direct sun. Fertilize houseplants as needed to replace nutrients lost due to increased watering and growth. Use a balanced fertilizer according to label directions.