



Waking Your Garden Up for Spring

When the weather starts to warm up, gardeners understandably can't wait to jump in and start digging – especially after a long and harsh winter. While we applaud your enthusiasm, it's best to err on the side of caution and follow Nature as she slowly awakes, enjoying the process along the way. We have a long growing season in St. Louis, and have the luxury of a gradual start, so we might as well do it properly. Here is a task list to help you set priorities for a great start to your garden year:

Spring Gardening Begins in the Fall

Gardening is a circular task, so it is not surprising that spring preparations begin as winter is winding down.

- Leaving ornamental grasses, perennials with interesting seedheads untrimmed until spring is an obvious aesthetic choice and will help provide food and shelter for birds and small mammals.
- Consider taking this a step further for a “messy garden” approach to your fall garden tasks. Delaying garden clean up until spring will support overwintering native bees, butterflies and moths (and their cocoons) and other beneficial insects such as assassin bugs, praying mantises, spiders, lace wings and ladybugs.
- In addition, by not raking or leaf-blowing perennial beds, you'll build the soil and protect the crowns of the plants.
- Don't skimp on weeding, however, and be sure to deadhead any freely-seeding plants that are borderline invasive.
- You may wish to gather up fallen larger-leaved perennials (like hostas) to chop up with autumn leaves for compost.
- Get a head-start on spring by preparing any new beds in the fall. Consider building raised beds or simply remove any existing sod or weeds, cover with layers of newspaper, and top with plastic weighted down with bricks. In the spring, simply pull back the plastic, add compost and your new bed will be ready for planting.
- Turfgrass renewal and lawn preparation is another chore to take care of in the autumn, not in spring.

Consider a Slower Start: March

The desire to “get out and garden!” begins to grow as the days grow longer. Our variable weather will play a huge role in when you start these tasks – in St. Louis spring sometimes begins at the end of February, sometimes mid-April or later!

- We suggest tempering your impatience with an agreement to coexist with the native wildlife. Delay your clean-up activities until *after* several 50° days and allow overwintering pollinators to “wake-up” for spring and move on.
- Rain often arrives just when you've planned a work day. Forcing a digging schedule when soil is wet will cause soil compaction and impact root penetration. Watch where you step too, staying off soggy lawns and garden beds.
- Keeping that in mind, it is safe to plant trees, shrubs and perennials *as soon as they become available* at local nurseries.
- Generally speaking, trees are pruned during winter dormancy; roses cut back in very early spring before growth begins; and conifers as little as possible. Dead, damaged and diseased branches should always be removed. Early-blooming shrubs are *not* pruned until after flowering – if at all. Summer bloomers may be pruned in early spring if needed.
- When things are relatively dry, pull back leaves and winter mulch somewhat from emerging bulbs and early perennials.
- For a quick “dig fix,” plant some early vegetables or make some containers with early spring flowers.

- If it is too wet to go out and garden, take time to inventory what you have and check for empty spaces or plants that you want to remove. Evaluate your site for light and water and then research pollinator and bird-friendly choices that are appropriate for those conditions. The right plant in the right place means less work for the gardener!
- Keep all this in mind at the nursery to avoid impulse buying which may lead to crowded or unhappy plants.
- Be on the lookout for common early weeds such as creeping charlie, euonymus, honeysuckle, mulberry and maple; if you don't recognize a plant, allow it to grow until you know it is a weed, so you don't accidentally eliminate a friend.
- Mid-March is usually the right time to cut back ornamental grasses, sedges and liriopse, just as new growth emerges.
- Toward the end of March when roses are leafing out, it's time to start pulling back all the protective winter mulch!

Waking Up: April

- Start observing your perennials: when new growth appears at the crown of the plant, go ahead prune out dead leaves and stems. This provides room for the new spring growth as it visually cleans up the landscape.
- Summer- and fall-blooming perennials are best divided in spring when cool temperatures and increased rainfall reduce the shock of division. Prepare your prospective transplant sites before you start. Dig the entire plant and divide into pieces, returning only one piece to the original location. Pass along any leftover pieces to friends with new gardens!
- Newly divided perennials should be treated with the same care you give new plants you are adding to your garden now.
- April 15th is the average last frost date for St. Louis, and you will see this reflected in the nursery inventory as more and more perennials come in and long-season annuals become available. Remember to save space for summer bloomers!
- It bears repeating: do not crowd your perennial plantings. The first 3 years for a perennial plant are described in the old saying "Sleep/ Creep/Leap" to indicate that most will not reach their mature width until the third year. Be patient.
- When transplanting, dig wide rather than deep: the crown of the plant should settle at the same height as it was in its pot and the sides of your hole should be graduated with the soil broken up.
- If this isn't a newly prepared bed, amend the soil with compost as you plant and then always top-dress with leaf mulch.
- With proper spacing of new perennials, there will be empty gaps which may be planted with annuals for a fuller look.
- To prevent invading grass and help contain the mulch, use a straight-edge spade to put a clean edge on each bed.
- When buds begin to appear on woody perennials and subshrubs, prune them down to about 6" from the ground.
- For woody perennial herbs, only prune to shape. Remove dead branches and allow new growth to develop.

Stepping Out: May

- When spring rains have tapered off, here is a method for watering new plants: once a day by hand for the 1st week; every other day for the 2nd week; and twice a week *whenever there is no rain* for the rest of the summer.
- Spring into summer tasks include starting to fertilize annuals mid-May, waiting to remove spring bulb foliage until it collapses around the end of May, and beginning to pinch summer-bloomers for denser branching and more flowers.
- This is how you know you've gotten off to a great start: your beds are weeded, edged and mulched and your perennials have new growth and flowers. Gardening is never finished, so take satisfaction in a bed well-done. Looking good is an incentive to continue the work that keeps the garden going: weeding, watering, deadheading and enjoying.

For More Information:

Bowood Farms tip sheets cover various types of plants as well as tips on transplanting perennials, trees and shrubs.

For more on supporting wildlife in your garden: <http://content.yardmap.org/learn/wildlife-value-of-a-messy-garden/>

For more on pruning perennials: <https://www.finegardening.com/article/pruning-subshrubs>

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