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Your Indoor Outdoor guide to gardening

APRIL

TREE AND SHRUB PLANTING

The beauty of your property is most dependent on the trees and shrubs in your landscape. Selection of cultivars and placement are very important to the whole landscape because of their size and relative permanence.

Selection: Selections are grouped into small trees (under 25' at maturity), medium trees (25' to 50' trees) or larger trees (can be well over 50' in height). Plant requirements for sun/shade, dry/moist, etc., should be considered first. Color, size and shape are some of the other criteria you can use for selection. When choosing, consider MATURE size, otherwise you will later be pruning and cutting out trees that have overgrown their allotted space.

Planting: Trees should be planted by digging a hole 2 or 3 times the diameter of the root ball and only as deep as the root ball. When the trees are in wire baskets, pry back the wire away from the trunk and cut the wire off. Remove all burlap from around the trunk, but not the root ball. Place the tree in the planting hole, and then remove coverings from the root ball, usually burlap, without disturbing the root ball. (Some burlap is manufactured from synthetic materials and does not breakdown over time, thus becoming a barrier to future root growth). The root ball should be in firm contact with the bottom of the hole, with no air pockets. Current practice for backfilling is to fill the planting hole about 1/3 full, then apply water to cover the new backfill and allow it to settle. Continue to fill hole with soil until it reaches the prior soil level. Forming a water retention circle around the tree's drip line will help insure that water is retained. Apply 3-4 inches of mulch, taking care to keep the mulch away from the tree trunk. While past practice was to amend the backfill soil with peat moss and other additives, research has shown that many roots remained in this, while if backfilled with native soil the roots spread beyond into adjacent soil seeking additional nutrition.

"Bare root plants" are less expensive than balled & burlapped ones and are easier to plant. When you receive bare root plants, follow the instructions from the shipper, these include instructions to keep the roots moist. When planting, spread the roots out similar to the way they were growing, and then place into the planting hole. Follow all other instructions as above.

By Ed Cron, Penn State Master Gardener

FLOWERING THIS MONTH

- Bulbs: Anemone pulsatilla, Crocus, daffodils, species tulips.
- Perennials: Arabis caucasica, Brunnera macrophylla, Vinca minor.
- Native wildflowers: bleeding heart, foamflower, Jacob's ladder, Spring beauty, violets.
- Shrubs and Trees: Japanese andromeda, azaleas, Cornelian cherry, flowering cherries, Daphne, Eric carnea, Forsythia, early magnolias, Bradford pear, Japanese quince, redbud, Rhododendron, serviceberry, spicebush, Viburnum.

SEASONAL

- Frost Free Dates by location: The last frost/freeze date – the last day when the average minimum temperature is 32°F.
- Celebrate Earth Day on April 22nd.
- To determine if soil is ready to work (once thawed), take a handful and squeeze it. If it crumbles, then it is ready to plant. If not, wait several days and try again.

- Bait for slugs, and clean out hiding places where they live.
- Cut and remove weeds near the garden to help prevent plant virus disease.

HOUSEPLANTS

- Rinse dust off leaves with a gentle spray of room-temperature water.
- Time to repot any plants that have outgrown their pots. Generally, pots sizes are increased by a 1" diameter each repotting.
- Begin fertilizing plants again.
- Excellent time to propagate houseplants by cutting or division.
- If starting houseplants in water, change the water completely on a weekly basis to reduce buildup of algae.
- Easter lilies need bright, indirect light when indoors. After flowering, move the outdoors where they will bloom again next year.
- According to research at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, larger plants and more flowers are produced in a "soil mix of 1 part sphagnum, 1 part peat moss, 2 parts perlite and 2 parts compost" than in four other commonly used mixes.

BULBS

- After flowering, fertilize bulbs you are naturalizing; dig up ones you are growing as annuals. Do not cut the foliage of spring bulbs for arrangements. General fertilizer recommendations are 10-10-10 at a rate of 3 pounds per 100 square feet. It is better to take a soil test for more precise fertilization.
- Start tuberous begonias and caladiums indoors for later planting outdoors.
- Label areas where bulbs are overcrowded so they can be dug up and separated in July. Overcrowding will reduce flowering.

COMPOST

- Resume turning the compost pile.

VEGETABLE GARDENS

- Use raised beds in areas where sold soils or poor drainage are an ongoing problem.
- Fertilize the vegetable garden before planting.
- Plant asparagus and rhubarb.
- Start sowing cool-season vegetables (peas, carrots, beets, radishes) outside, two weeks before average last spring frost.
- Set out transplants of cauliflower, cabbage, and broccoli.
- Plant seed potatoes.
- Start seed indoors for summer crops (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant).
- Encourage a child to start a garden this year, plan for early carrots and peas, and then add green beans, sunflowers, pumpkins and sweet corn when the weather warms up.
- Harvest asparagus until spear size decreases.

TREE FRUITS, NUTS & SMALL FRUITS

- Plant new fruit and nut trees, raspberries, strawberries, grapes.
- Start tree spray schedule when growth begins.
- Apply lime sulfur spray.
- Mulch between rows of brambles.
- If fruit trees start to bloom and frost is forecast, they can be covered overnight with a sheet and a 5 watt light bulb hanging in the tree will provide some protection for small trees.

HERBS

- Herbs seeds can be started indoors for use in kitchen gardens or for transplanting outside later. Some easily grown herbs include basil, chives, marjoram, parsley, sage, savory.

LAWNS

- Seed bare patches.
- Fill in slight depressions with sifted topsoil.
- Water the lawn several days prior to aerating it. Aerate the lawn as soon as possible to help improve root growth and plant vigor. This helps increase drought resistance and decreases disease and insect problems.
- Cool season grasses can still be seeded. Keep the seeded areas moist to allow germination.
- Before beginning to mow your lawn, remove sticks, rocks, and any other debris to avoid damage to the lawnmower or yourself from the objects.
- Begin mowing the lawn when the grass is 3 to 4 inches tall, cut back to 2-1/2 inches. Mow once or twice a weekly when plants are rapidly growing in spring.
- It is not necessary to bag grass clippings if mowing is very frequent (two or more times weekly)
- The first grass clippings will be higher in nutrient content and lower in weed seeds than later cuttings. These can be a good addition to a compost pile if no herbicides have been used on the lawn.
- Spot treat broadleaf weeds, by removing them, or by using herbicides.

PERENNIALS, BIENNIALS, & ANNUALS

- Fertilize as growth begins.
- Gradually remove winter mulch.
- Continue to divide and transplant.
- Plant cool-season annuals (pansies, sweet peas, snapdragons).

TREES & SHRUBS

- Continue to prune dead branches and those damaged over winter.
- Consider adding an evergreen hedge to the north of your home to reduce heating costs by 34% in open areas, or 10% in more sheltered areas.
- Soak bare-root shrubs and trees in water overnight prior to planting.
- Do not add organic matter to soil when planting trees, it encourages the roots to stay in the area of the planting hole rather than spreading out.
- Evergreens that had problems with drying in the summer through late fall drought will begin to show damage this month.
- Research at the University of Colorado indicates that where soil drainage is good, certain good species of Pseudomonas is the soil feed on the juglone (toxin from black walnut trees), thus making other plants less susceptible to damage.
- The Cooley spruce gall insect will produce a pinecone distortion when growth begins. Sprays for control should be made before eggs are laid in late April.
- If tent caterpillars are a problem on fruit or shade trees, the larvae will be present in April.
- Begin to prune spring flowering shrubs after their flowers start to fade.
- Never top (cut off the main central branch) a tree.
- Young trees should be kept well-watered and fertilized.

ROSES

- Prepare bare-root roses for planting by pruning damaged growth and shortening healthy canes by a third and trimming roots by half. Soak plants in muddy water overnight and plant as soon as possible. Water and mulch after planting.
- Prune rose bushes.

WATER GARDENS

- Divide hardy plants. Lotus can be planted in late April, if weather is above freezing. Do not feed fish until water temperature is above 60°F.