

## Gardening Notes for March

March can be such a finicky month! Several years ago, there was a long warm spell followed by two nights of extremely cold temperatures. The result was a multitude of Hydrangeas killed to the ground! Some years we see snow storm after snow storm, while some years it is merely rain. So far it has been a mild winter with a few cold snaps that may prove damaging to some early bloomers. Fingers crossed! Keep referring to your notes or diary from last year as to when you sowed seed and performed other chores as you need not reinvent the wheel. Also, keep making notes for this year so that you can see if any of the changes you made yield better results!

### Things to do:

#### Garden

- Finish removing excess leaves and or winter evergreen boughs from early sprouting perennials and bulbs.
- Finish, or perhaps start cutting back ornamental grasses and perennials. Remove the foliage of acaulescent Hellebores (Hellebores that produce flowers from the crown, not the tips of last year's stems), such as *Helleborus x hybridus* cultivars or *Helleborus atrorubens* pictured at right. Try to tend to this as early as possible in the month so the declining foliage does not distract from the flower display. Watch for emerging flower stems and buds so as not to accidentally remove a flower!
- Cut and remove shrub or small tree stems that may have broken during winter storms and winds.
- March is time to finish pruning! Finish removing up to 1/3 of the older stems of Lilacs, Kerria, Forsythia, Slender Deutzia, Weigela and other multi-stemmed flowering shrubs that bloom on growth from last year.
- For pruning *Hydrangeas macrophylla*, remove a few of the oldest stems, while *Hydrangea arborescens* is best cut to near the ground as it will bloom on new growth. *Hydrangea paniculata* blooms on new growth, but the degree of cutting it back depends upon the density of the flower petals and how much rain



water it holds. It can be cut back more aggressively if they have a more open panicle such as displayed on 'Fire and Ice' (pictured above right). Plants with dense flower panicles like 'Limelight' (pictured at right) should receive a light pruning. A heavy pruning will result in longer and weaker stems that cannot support a heavy wet flower, resulting in the stem bending downward.



- Purple and Golden Smoke Bush are best stooled or cut back to 6-12", providing an attractive habit with optimum foliage color, although such treatment will sacrifice all summer flowers.

- Red or Golden Stemmed Dogwoods and Willows should be stooled or cut back to 3-6" every 2-3 years in March to encourage new shoot development, which will sport the best red or golden stem color. I have had great success with stooling red stemmed willows (*Salix alba* 'Britzensis') annually as pictured at right. The base of the plant is located at the tip of the arrow.



- *Vitex* (Chaste Tree) can be cut back hard (to 12") or moderately (to 4"), depending upon how tall you wish the plant to grow in your Garden – obviously, the less you cut it back, the taller the plant will grow this season.

- Prune Butterfly Bushes back to 12-18" in height, and Russian Sage, Lavender, and *Caryopteris* back to approximately 6". Do not prune Rosemary plants in spring, but rather wait until summer to shape and/or harvest stems.

- Prune 2-6' long stems of Forsythia and Pussy Willow to bring inside for forcing or to simply enjoy the open blooms. *Salix* 'Mount Aso' is an attractive pink flowered form of Pussy Willow, bred for the cut flower industry (pictured at right). Once the flowers are no longer effective, the plant can be cut back heavily or lightly. The harder it is cut back, the longer the shoots and potential



flowering display (and flowering stem harvest) next spring!

- Edge bed-lines and lightly re-mulch bed areas. If the beds were mulched last year, only 1-2” of new mulch should be needed unless there was significant erosion or the mulch was removed with the autumn leaves! Remember, shredded leaves also make a great mulch!
- Prune shrub roses back by about ½. For hybrid Tea Roses, cut plants back by ½, making certain that you cut to an outside facing bud. Those small red dots, as pictured on the left, that are typically subtended by an encircling leaf scar from last year are leaf buds. As a rule of thumb, make the cut above the leaf bud equal to the diameter of the stem.



- Remove your *Canna*, *Colocasia*, *Alocasia* or *Musa* tubers from their winter storage boxes near month’s end and pot them up in an adequately sized container, and place near a sunny window. They will sprout best if bottom heat is provided, but that is not necessary. Water sufficiently to keep the soil moist but not wet until you start to see signs of life.
- Bring *Brugmansia* and Edible Figs out of the dark basement or closets, start to water regularly and place near a warm sunny window to encourage new growth to begin.
- Any *Plumaria* (common name of Frangipani) that was stored in the basement should also be potted up and brought into an area with bright light.
- Watch for newly emerging bulbs. The foliage is often difficult to see as it emerges and can be stepped on while attending to other chores. Plants like *Bulbocodium vernum* (now *Colchicum vernum*), commonly called Spring Meadow Saffron as pictured at right have protective dark purple and difficult to see leaves that protect the bud. Such cheerful plants are certainly worth protecting!



### Turf

- Thatch lawns and overseed bare or thin areas. It is best to thatch the lawn when it is dry, allowing at least several days to pass after a rain before attempting to thatch.

- If Crabgrass was an issue in 2022, apply pre-emergent on lawns for Crabgrass control before Forsythia shows flower color.
- Take a soil sample and send to the soil testing lab via a mailer that is available at your local extension office. The report will be emailed to your home and will provide information on how much fertilizer and lime to apply.

### Vegetables

- Take soil samples from turf and vegetable garden areas to determine pH and soil fertility requirements. As with turf, submit the sample via a mailer that is available at the local extension office.
- Try not to walk on the soil when it is saturated, since it will compact, reducing the air spaces and damaging the soil structure.
- Seed out peas and radishes at the end of the month. The old rule of thumb was to sow the seed on St. Patrick's Day, which may be too early and cold in northern NJ, unless you have very sandy and well-drained soils.
- Start Broccoli seeds indoors in early March, tomato seeds from mid-March on and eggplant, peppers and parsley towards the end of March.

### Houseplants

- If you have a straggly Coleus plant, you may wish to take cuttings and start new and stronger plants to move outdoors for summer display.
- Continue to turn your houseplants every couple of weeks. Often difficult to see, the plants will slowly grow towards the sun (a process called phototropism) and turning the plant will produce more evenly grown plants.
- As the day length continues to become longer and plants begin to initiate new growth, the plants will require a somewhat more frequent watering regiment near month's end.
- Repot succulents and houseplants to larger containers. Plants that have been kept indoors should be repotted in spring if they have roots wrapping around the root ball when removed from the container. Another sign of a need for repotting is if the roots have literally lifted the plant and the soil up to the lip of the pot and all the water runs over the rim when watered. When repotting, shake off some of the previous soil, prune off any decaying roots and repot in a container that is 2" +/- larger in diameter. If the plant is a succulent, use a well-drained potting media containing bark and large perlite.
- Many succulents can be propagated by simply laying a leaf on top of the soil or even on a bench top (*Echeveria* leaves are pictured at right). A new plantlet and roots will



- typically appear at the base of the leaf within several weeks!
- If your succulent has become too leggy, as often happens with age, you can cut off the upper portion of the plant that has foliage, let the wound callus over by laying it on a table for 3-5 days and then stick the rosette back into a container with well-drained soil. The stem will typically regenerate new roots and a new plant!
  - Remove any tired or half-brown foliage from your houseplants and start to fertilize. You can either provide a 2 to 4-month granular feed or a ½ dilute liquid feed every month through September. Remember, the soil in containers has little to no nutrient value of its own. As the day lengths get longer, the plants will start to grow and the extra feed will be appreciated.
  - Above all else, find time to visit a local arboretum and take note of some new plants to add to your March Garden. Below is the pink flowered form of White Forsythia (*Abeliophyllum distichum* ‘Roseum’) at Frelinghuysen Arboretum, which is deer resistant, fragrant and very low maintenance. Unfortunately, they are rarely carried in garden centers since they bloom in March before most gardeners start shopping. They are best located in specialty nurseries or from mail order sources. Regardless, they are worth the effort and you will be the envy of your gardening friends!



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