

Gardening Notes for May

With the windy chill of late March and the showers of April behind us, early May looks to provide a wonderful assortment of spring blooming plants. The unusually warm winter and early spring has definitely pushed many plants into an earlier bloom period, but hopefully seasonal temperatures will dominate for May. May is always a hectic month, so take the time to make notes in your journal and enjoy long evening strolls with your favorite beverage to smell and enjoy the fruits of your efforts.

Things to do:

Garden

- Prune leggy Azaleas and Rhododendrons as they finish blooming. This will improve the habit or shape of the plant while still ensuring flower bud development for next year. If time allows, the spent flower trusses can be removed, which will help increase the number of blooms next year.
- By late May it will be clearly evident which parts of a plant have died back for various reasons. Always check the base of the stems to see if mice have girdled any stems. This was a highly problematic problem this year at Willowood Arboretum. It is also an issue when weeds and/or a groundcover obscures the base of a plant. Both conditions allow mice to covertly dine on the bark.
- If you have fertile soils, some perennials such as New York and New England Asters as well as the taller Sedums, such as 'Autumn Joy' should be pinched in mid to late May to prevent them from flopping later in the season.
- Some plants such as Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) can be easily sown in the garden by seed. Look under the foliage for the seed pods (pictured at right) and lightly squeeze the pod. If it splits open, the seeds are rip and spread them close to where you would like to add some plants. I say close since the seeds are moved about by ants, so the planting will take on a very naturalistic appearance, based upon where the ants finally deposit the seeds! Other plants such as Winter Aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis* as seen at right) have seed that is dispersed by wind out of the open, cup-



shaped seed capsules. As the plants rock back and forth, the seed is tossed a short distance from the capsules where they will germinate the following spring.

Longwood Gardens has found collecting and distributing the seed of *Eranthis* to new areas of the garden to be a far more successful, albeit slower method of spreading the plants than the typical method of installing the tubers in the fall.

- Let bulb foliage turn yellow or tan before removing to ensure proper bulb and flower development for next year. Do not tie it together or braid it, since that reduces that amount of surface area exposed to sunlight and its ability to make sugars responsible for next year's embryonic flowers.
- For bulbs such as *Eranthis* (Winter Aconite) and *Galanthus* (Snowdrops), dig and divide existing clumps as the plants will establish more quickly than planting the geophytes from newly purchased 'bulbs' in the fall! A geophyte is a plant with an underground storage organ, like a bulb or a corm.
- If your Narcissus (Daffodils) failed to bloom this year, it is possible they were planted too shallow for the bulb to grow to the proper size in order for it to bloom. Dig them (as pictured at right), tease apart the clump into several smaller clumps and replant the bulb to a depth of 6" deep. Take care not to damage the hairlike roots. Yes, some of the foliage will be buried a bit on replanting, but that is fine. In the clump of Narcissus 'Sun Disc' pictured above right, notice the small bulb size of the one pulled down lower – far too small to yield a flower! In the image at right, taken 3 years following division and replanting, the plants are once again in bloom!
- For a neat garden, edge those bedlines and compost the remnants!
- Always make certain the soil has drained adequately before working it, as disturbing the soil while too wet will destroy the soil structure. If you can make the soil into a baseball, it is too moist!
- Plant out tender annuals after the last frost-free date in your part of the state (generally May 15th, but frosts can occur later). Temperatures in May can fluctuate from 90° one day to 30° the next! Also, certain annuals that like it warm, such as Catharanthus (the annual Vinca) and ornamental Sweet Potato Vines (*Ipomea*) should not be planted



- until late May or early June for best results.
- Bring out your containers of overwintered Geophytes like Pineapple Lily (*Eucomis*) like ‘Sparkling Burgundy’ pictured at right in early to mid-May. After sitting in a cool garage or basement all winter without water, start to water and place in full sun. If the bulb has been in the same pot for over 5 years, it undoubtedly has a lot of offsets and is in need of a repotting! Same is true of *Acidanthera* (Abyssinian Gladiolus)!
 - Remove the Banana and Canna roots from the basement and plant them in a sunny location in soils that are enriched with compost to help hold moisture.
 - If you have yet to buy any Canna or Banana plants, this is the month to pick some up at the local garden center. They are great for providing texture and color!
 - The *Colocasia* and *Alocasia* roots or potted plants can be planted out in early May. They are surprisingly tolerant of cooler temperatures when young.
 - Pot up Dahlia tubers or plant them directly in the soil come late May.
 - Finish mulching perennial or shrub borders during the early part of May.
 - Weed! Remember the average weed seed’s life is 7 years, so remove those early to flower cool season weeds before they go to seed. In particular, remove Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), as it has a harmful allopathic effect on all neighboring plants, including shade trees.



Vegetable

- For vegetable gardens, use a broadfork to gently loosen and aerate the soil. A broadfork has 3-5 sharp tines that penetrate into the soil with two 5’ long handles (as pictured at right). By using your body weight against the handles and rocking back and forth, the soil is loosened but not disrupted. Tilling the soil damages both the earthworms who help aerate the soil and beneficial fungus, which assist the vegetables in obtaining nutrients and water. Current research shows that fungus also produces and transfers the amino acid Ergothioneine to vegetables. Ergothioneine is an antioxidant with anti-inflammatory properties that has been shown to battle chronic illness and allow people to live longer. You have to love fungus!



- Get the soil for Vegetable Gardens tested for nutrients and pH level if it has not been tested in a couple of years. The packets to mail in your dried soil samples are available at your local County Extension office
- If you are looking to ease into growing vegetables or you have a deck, plant your cool season crops in containers. They are both ornamental and delicious. The image at right is a container of lettuce photographed at Chanticleer Gardens and it looks as beautiful as it is tasty!
- Thin those cool season vegetables like beets that were directly sown during April. Thinning will allow the plant and swollen root to develop more fully and the greens from the thinned beets are great added to salads!
- Start to plant frost tender vegetables. For the eager, the wall of water can be used for tomatoes and other tender vegetables that are planted during the potentially cold first half of the month, although there is no harm in waiting until early June! In fact, adding a second planting of tomatoes in early to mid-June will help to ensure tomato harvest through September.



Turf

- Cut those lawns! Remember, 2 ½ - 3" length is far healthier for the turf than a 2" cut. Do not remove the clippings unless they are exceptionally thick, since they release nitrogen and other nutrients back into the soil as they break down.
- Spot treat for dandelions or any other aggressive lawn weeds.
- Based on soil samples, fertilize if it was not done in April. Remember, during heavy rains a lot of the fertilizer may wash away into drains and streams, which harms the environment. Only apply what is truly needed, which the results from the soil test will dictate.
- Apply limestone if the soil pH is acidic, once again dictated by the soil test.
- Evaluate the size of your lawn. If it has grown beyond your needs, consider reducing the size and adding more groundcovers or low care flowering plants like Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum mutuum*), late blooming Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) or a Golden Rod (*Solidago* species). Add a Sedge such as Pennsylvania Sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*), which can provide a nice green mulch for the perennials or it can be a standalone ground cover (pictured at the end of the notes). Think native! Not only will native groundcovers provide food for pollinators, but they will also support caterpillars which in turn will feed our songbirds. They also provide habitat and cover for moths, butterflies or other insects as they go through the process of pupation and mature into the adult stage of life. Cornell Botanic Garden has crafted such a lawn area, which can be seen by googling Native Lawn Demonstration Area – Cornell Botanic Gardens.

Houseplants

- Later this month is the time to move houseplants outside where they are happiest. The Jade Plant pictured at right along with the accompanying Air Plants in its branches and Haworthia at the base spend each summer outside where it flushes new growth. Remember, just because they are called houseplants does not mean they cannot leave the house!
- Place the plants outside where they will receive indirect sunlight or morning sun initially. The plants will often not fare well if they go from the darker environment of a home to full sun.
- Some of the plants that have a fast-draining bark soil mix, such as Bromeliads and Jade Plants may have soil so dry after a winter indoors that the water will simply pass through without being absorbed by the soil. In these cases, you might notice the leaves curling or gaining the appearance of a raisin. To fully rehydrate the soil, place the pot in a plastic basin (or bathtub!) and allowed to soak for 3-4 hours. A good long soak will rehydrate the soil mix and the plant!
- For those plants that have outgrown their containers, this is the time to up-pot them into a larger container. In general, the new container should only be 2-3" larger in diameter and depth than the previous pot, as seen above right. If it is too large, there is a chance the plant could be overwatered. Remember too that the container should have a drainage hole at the base and a saucer to receive excess water.



- Fertilize! From now through September, the plants are actively growing and should receive a 50% dilute mix of liquid fertilizer once a month.

Final Thoughts

- Frequently visit local garden centers as new additions are coming in weekly or even daily. Also, do not be afraid to ask the folks at the garden center for a specific plant if you do not see it. It is a hectic time of the year, but owners of garden centers also need to know what plants are in demand.
- Read the notes that you made this winter and last May and reflect on how to improve the garden. Your journal is indispensable and it is now time to put your thoughts into action!



Bruce Crawford

Manager of Horticulture, Morris County Parks Commission