

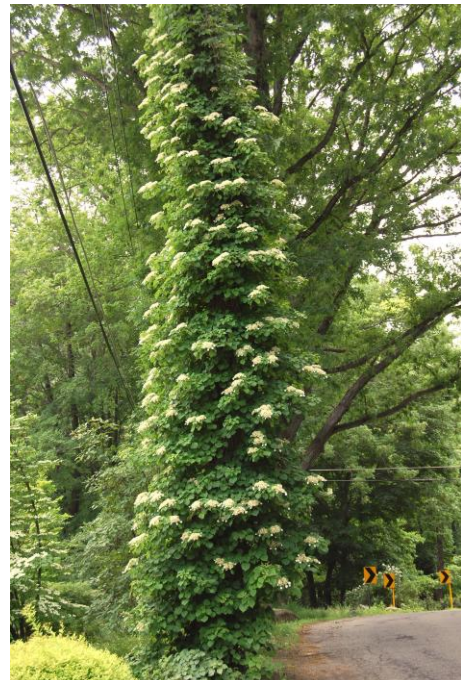
Gardening Notes for April

When visiting my local Garden Center I have been studying the seed rack and associated materials needed for starting one's own plants and the supplies are certainly dwindling. A sure sign that the general interest in gardening remains strong following COVID. Many of us have come to appreciate the beauty of plants and the calming act of working in the soil. As the sun and warmth of April unfold, take a deep breath and prioritize what must be completed vs. what could be postponed for a day or week. Also, spring is a time to begin anew, so give thought on how you could change things up a bit, whether it be containers, a few new plants or perhaps a whole new garden design! HAPPY SPRING!

Things to do:

Garden

- Early April is a time to prune vines, such as Wisteria, Climbing Hydrangea and Clematis. All too often Wisteria vines do not bloom because they were pruned too heavily throughout the growing season. The plants respond by producing more vegetative foliage, but few flower spurs. Wisteria is a legume and should not be fertilized either, as it fixes its own Nitrogen. Once the plant has bloomed, take note of the short flower spurs (they will have a bean-like fruit pod attached) that remain and continue to yield blooms from one year to the next. During the late winter, only remove all or most of the stem beyond the spurs in order to ensure flowering for the coming year.
- *Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris* (Climbing Hydrangea Vine) pictured at right and *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* (Climbing Hydrangea Vine) produce flowers on stems that project 12-24" out from the supporting wall or tree. These stems should not be pruned as the flower buds will be removed as well.
- For Clematis, there are three general types and associated pruning, which are divided into Type A, B and C. For type A, the flowers bloom on last year's wood, and they should be pruned just after bloom. An example would be *Clematis montana*. Type B blooms on both last year's wood as well as current year's wood. In March or April, these plants should be pruned back to just



above two large and vigorous appearing buds, roughly 3-5' high on the vine. An example is *Clematis* 'Nelly Moser'. Lastly, Type C blooms entirely on new wood, such as *Clematis orientalis*, the Orange Peel Clematis. These vines can be cut back hard or lightly trimmed.

- Finish pruning woody plants, roses and coppiced plants, such as Red Stemmed Dogwoods (*Cornus sericea* and its cultivars) by early April.
- Mulch planting beds! For perennial gardens, there is nothing wrong with shredded bark, but I have become fond of cutting the brown foliage and stems of perennials into 4-6" long pieces and allowing them to act as a mulch (pictured above right). In order to keep the bed looking tidy and socially acceptable, the edges of the beds can be mulched with shredded bark.



- Divide grasses and perennials if necessary. Remember, the central portion of the plant (a 25-year-old *Miscanthus* pictured above) is the oldest and most likely dead portion. The outer, vigorous ring will yield at least 10 new plants, with 9 of those going to friends, a new garden, or a curbside sale!
- If you overwintered Hardy Banana (*Musa basjoo*) outside under the cover of leaves, remove the insulating leaves and the surrounding cage used to keep the leaves in place.
- Continue potting up Canna, Banana, Alocasia and other tropical plants that were overwintered in the basement or heated garages. Make certain to test the tubers to ensure they have no soft spots or decay. !
- Apply corn meal gluten to flower beds as an organic



alternative to the many chemical pre-emergents for weeds. It also serves as a mild fertilizer!

- Time to empty the winter decorations from the containers and add fresh color. Options abound for colorful container combinations. Pansies and violas are always a good option, but so are cool



season vegetables, such as lettuce and spinach. In the container above right, the dark purple lettuce makes for a nice backdrop to the pansies. A great chartreuse accent is the grassy evergreen foliage of *Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon', (Golden Sweet Flag) pictured at right.

- If you wish to recycle the soil from last year's containers, remove it from the pot, break it up and add up to 50% fresh potting soil or compost with perlite.
- Always pay attention to what type of potting soil you are adding to your new containers. I prefer to use well-drained succulent mix for everything since I have found the extra aeration to be good for root production. Also, pay attention to whether the mix contains fertilizer. Often it does and we end up overfertilizing our plants!
- It may go without saying, but visit local nurseries frequently to see the new plants that are arriving weekly and, in some cases, daily. The most unique selections always sell out quickly

Bulbs

- April is certainly the time for bulbs! If your Narcissus have stopped blooming, they may have been planted too shallow. Plants can be dug, divided and replanted while in leaf, as seen at right.
- As soon as the early blooming bulbs (such as Snowdrops, Winter Aconites, Snowflakes and Scilla) have finished blooming, the clumps can be dug, divided and moved about the garden if so wished. These bulbs are equally as successful to move in spring while actively growing as when purchased as dormant bulbs in autumn – and sometimes more successful. Bulbs like Snowdrops also have tremendous variation under close inspection and the most interesting can be divided and multiplied.



- I have had poor luck planting Snowflake (*Leucojum vernum*) seen at right in the fall, but great luck moving them about in the spring. It is also financially more prudent!



- One of the bulbs everyone recognizes is Tulips. Although they look great in displays, my garden is not a display garden and I grew frustrated with the large flowered hybrids that were out of scale for my small garden. Plus, many hybrids would bloom for one or two season and then simply produce foliage. Years back, when my daughter was young, I started to delve into species Tulips. I only remember this since the second Tulip species I purchased was ‘Little Princess’, a name I would teasing call my daughter! It was actually a cross between two species and after 26 years, the bulbs are still blooming dependably each year (as seen above with *Euphorbia myrsinites*).



- The first species Tulip I tried and have grown for over 30 years is *Tulipa urumiensis* (pictured on the right), although it is often sold under its previously accepted name of *Tulipa tarda*. It has actually reseeded and spread throughout my garden. Talk about success! Both



- this tulip and ‘Little Princess bloom in late April into May and grow best in well drained soils with a pH near neutral!
- If deep red is your color, try *Tulipa linifolia*, pictured in the closing image. The attractive slender foliage – as the species epithet proclaims – provides a nice backdrop to the intensely, deep red flowers. I have been growing it now for three years and each year the display looks better. Blooming a week or so later than the

previous two selections, it is a wonderful addition for a rock garden or a slope covered with a gravel mulch.

Turf

- Edge bedlines and compost the pieces of turf that have been removed.
- Finish thatching and raking lawns. If crabgrass was a severe problem in 2024, apply a pre-emergent crabgrass control to established lawns before or during Forsythia bloom.
- Apply fertilizer and lime to lawns as prescribed by soil test results. If phosphate levels are adequate, consider using a 0% phosphate fertilizer to reduce stream and river contamination.
- If overseeding or spot seeding, consider some of the more contemporary blends of grass seed that require less irrigation.

Vegetables

- Submit soil sample for nutrient and pH tests if you did not submit a sample last year.
- In early April for those in Southern locations, later for those more Northern areas, seed can be sown directly in the garden for Beets, Carrots, Spinach, Cilantro, Lettuce, Arugula, Mustard Greens, Bok Choy, Peas and Turnips.
- Finish sowing tomato, pepper, and eggplant seeds. Earlier seeded Lettuce, Swiss chard, broccoli and cabbage seedlings can now be planted outside, especially



under low tunnels or in protected containers on decks or patios. For tomatoes, if you sowed your seed in a tray and the first leaves or Cotyledons are now well developed, tease apart the seedlings and install the plants in individual cells or pots. Tomato seedlings can be planted deep, since roots will develop along the entire stem, providing a stout and strong plant (see images above – before planting on the left and planted to the proper depth on the right).

- Resist the urge to turn over or work the soil in vegetable gardens if the soil is too moist. If you can form baseballs from the soil, it needs a few more days to drain!
- It is best to use a soil broadfork (as seen below right) to loosen the soil, by pushing it into the ground and rocking it back and forth vs. using a rototiller. The thrashing of the tiller damages the soil structure and the beneficial soil borne

mycorrhizae, which help in the growth of your vegetables. It is also far more peaceful!

- It is time to plant potatoes, as they are typically planted 2-3 weeks prior to the frost-free date (May 15 in central NJ). Use 'seed' potatoes from a seed company and resist using potatoes that you have bought at a grocery store that are sprouting!
- April is also the time to plant onion sets, which are small dormant bulbs. Plant them 1-2" deep and 3-4" apart to allow for growth.

Houseplants

- With the increase in daylength, houseplants are starting to grow and will benefit from an application of liquid fertilizer. Typically dilute the fertilizer by 50% and apply monthly from mid to late March/early April through September.
- The more root bound houseplants can be repotted into a larger pot! The receiving pot should be 1-2" larger than the original container and preferably it should be clay and not plastic (as pictured below). Clay allows air and water to pass



through the pot. Air is obviously beneficial for root respiration, while the passage and evaporation of water cools the root run during the heat of summer. The limited upsizing of the container is important for preventing overwatering. The added soil obviously lacks roots and as a result, holds larger amounts of water. Make certain to position the soil of the plant such that it is 1/2" below the rim of the pot, as seen above left. This will prevent water from overflowing the container. Also, as mentioned prior, check the potting soil for fertilizer. Many potting soils contain slow-release fertilizer, which will prove more than adequate for several months of feeding.



Bruce Crawford

Manager of Horticulture, the Morris County Parks Commission