

Gardening Notes for April



Sanguinea canadensis



Mertensia virginicus



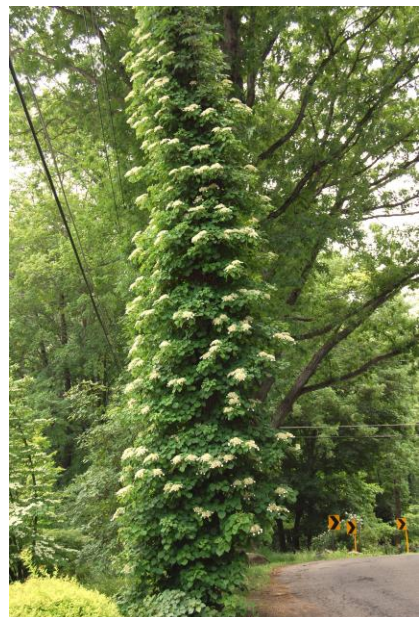
Rhus aromatica

Happy Spring! I had a feeling in February that spring would never arrive! Arrive it did, along with all those springtime tasks. Always remember to take a moment and enjoy those wonderful springtime blooms we have waited all winter to enjoy, such as Bloodroot (above left), Virginia Bluebell (center) and Fragrant Sumac (right). Spring is also a good time to breath fresh life into a garden, whether it be new containers or some new plants you may have read about this winter! As always, remember to keep your journal up to date!

Things to do:

Garden

- Early April is a time to prune vines, such as Wisteria, Climbing Hydrangea and Clematis if they had not been pruned in the fall. 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. They will continue to yield blooms for the years to come and only remove all or most of the stem beyond the spurs. Also, inspect the ground beneath the mulch and remove any spreading vines before they overwhelm neighboring shrubs!
- *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 which are divided into Type A, B and C, depending on the pruning. For type A, the flowers bloom on last year's wood, and they should be pruned just after flowering in mid-June. An example would be *Clematis montana*. Type B blooms on both last year's wood as well as current year's wood. In late March or April, these plants should be pruned back to just above two large and swelling 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. Type C vines can be cut back hard or lightly, depending on your garden.

- 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, which is all you will see once growth starts.



- Divide grasses and perennials if necessary. Remember, the central portion of the plant (a 25-year-old *Miscanthus* is pictured above) is the oldest portion and is most likely dead. The outer, vigorous ring will yield numerous new plants. Only replant one of the divisions, with the remainder 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 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 at 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 below.

- 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, read the label to see if the mix contains fertilizer. Often it does and we end up overfertilizing our plants when we add supplemental fertilizer!

- 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 even 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*) as seen above in the fall, but great luck dividing and moving them in the spring, providing you or a friend have some already growing. It is also financially more prudent!
- One bulb everyone tries to grow are the hybrid Tulips. Although they look great in displays, my garden is not a display garden and I grew frustrated with the large flowers that were out of scale for my small garden. Plus, many hybrids would bloom for one season and then simply produce foliage. Years back, when my daughter was young, I started to delve into species Tulips. I remember this well 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 at 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 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.
- For a fun switch, especially if you have a rock garden or a small garden area, consider some of the smaller, species Narcissus.

Narcissus romieuxii produces slender grass-like foliage in the fall that remains until spring. The flowers appear in late March or early April with a distinctively large trumpet and far smaller perianth (petals and sepals) members. Typical to Narcissus in general, they are also deer resistant, although they have been known to pull it out of the ground!



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 2025, 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 with rye and fescue 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 indoors. 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 with the soil, it needs a few more days to drain!
- It is best to use a soil broadfork (as seen at right) to loosen the soil. It works by pushing it into the ground and rocking it back and forth. It is much better than using a rototiller. The thrashing of the tiller damages the soil structure along with 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.

- Spring is a great time to up-pot houseplants into larger containers. I prefer clay containers as it is porous and allows air to pass through the pot. This helps with root respiration and growth. It also allows water to pass through to the outside of the pot, where it evaporates. The act of evaporating cools the root run during the heat of summer and improves the plant health since most root systems perform poorly when the soil around them becomes too warm. Also, it is important to select a container that does not pinch in at the top, such as the container in the center of the image above of the 3 pots. Ultimately, the plant will need to be removed from this container and up-potted again to a larger pot. When the



container pinches in at the top, it is impossible to remove the plant without either cutting the root system apart or breaking the pot, neither of which are desirable outcomes!

- It is also key to only up-pot into a container that is around 2" larger than the former container, as seen in the image above where the *Sansevieria* (Snake Plant) was transplanted from a 4" plastic pot to a 6" clay pot. The limited upsizing of the container is important for preventing overwatering. This may sound odd, but the newly added soil in the larger pot obviously lacks roots and as a result, holds larger amounts of water, that in turn keeps the entire soil mass in the container moister.
- Make certain to position the soil such that it is ½" below the rim of the pot, as seen above left. This will prevent water from overflowing the container. Also, as mentioned prior, fertilizer check the potting soil for fertilizer. Many potting soils contain slow-release fertilizers, which will prove more than adequate for several months of



feeding. Also, it may sound frivolous, but always make certain you purchase a saucer for the pot. It will eliminate messes in the home and helps prevent the soil from drying out too quickly when the pots are moved outside for the summer.

Wildlife



I recently read an article describing how our Butterfly populations have declined by 22% in the US over the past two decades. There are many potential reasons, ranging from higher temperatures and changes in rainfall to shifts in the use of pesticides and the loss of habitat. Most likely, it is a combination of all the suspected reasons. One-way gardeners can clearly help is to plant butterfly friendly native plants, such as the Bottlebrush Buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*) pictured above with the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, Beebalm (*Monarda fistulosa*), Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) pictured on the left

with a Fritillary or the Milkweeds (*Asclepias tuberosa* or *Asclepias incarnata*). You will improve the beauty of your garden while helping many of our beloved butterflies!



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