

MAD, MAD MARCH



In the garden with Wendy Matheson

Where to start, it's all gone mad...

After months of inertia mother nature has thrown us into action the words fanatic, frenetic and frenzy all come to mind.

Walking down the garden from the house to my office, a studio build next to the greenhouse in the walled garden, my heart jumps a beat at the first signs of emerging new growth of some of my favourite perennials. At last we can feast our eyes on bulbs and early flowering shrubs. However, there is nothing more likely to get the sap rising than the early vestiges of a sprouting spring herbaceous border, the fresh green growth of herbaceous perennial planting poking through the soil and showing the early promise of the forthcoming season's delights.

In these early growing months, as during winter, the evidence of a sound garden design is when plants are dormant and the structure of the landscaping comes into its own. Bold and strong geometry are key elements when designing space around the architecture of a house. Once the ground becomes more workable and frosts become scarcer there is no better time to look at redesigning and organising the garden plan. Established gardens can greatly benefit from a ruthless approach, not just by taking out overgrown and lack lustre shrubs and dividing clumps of mature perennials but by redefining the space and creating new and interested vistas and seating areas.

Jobs to be done this month

Spring bulbs

Many spring bulbs will be flowering this month so it's worthwhile taking notes of which varieties provide the best display and if required, more bulbs can be ordered later in the year to add to the display. Once the bulbs have finished flowering, leave the foliage to die back naturally and do not remove leaves until they have turned brown. This might look unsightly for a period but will help the bulb build up its food reserves and produce stronger flowers next year.

Herbaceous plants

Overgrown clumps of herbaceous perennials can be lifted, split and replanted this month before too much new growth



appears. Ideally, plants that have been growing in same position for a few years should be split, discarding the older parts of the plants and planting the young, fresh growths. Take this opportunity to remove the roots of any weeds, like couch grass that may be growing through your herbaceous plants.

Prior to planting herbaceous plants, make sure the soil is free of weed roots and work plenty compost into the soil.

As the new soft shoots emerge they will attract slugs. Provide some form of protection with slug traps or slug pellets.

On the lawn

Grass will be growing this month and will need to be cut before it gets too long.

General purpose lawns can be cut to 3cm (1.25in) in spring and fine lawns cut to 2cm (0.75in). Later in spring the lawns can be cut shorter.

Avoid scalping the grass (especially at lawn edges). Apart from looking unsightly, this encourages moss and weakens the grass.

Weeds come back in to growth this month – deal with them before they get out of hand, carefully dig out perennial weeds and their full root system using a hand fork, don't forget to tidy up any damage done to the soil when removing weeds from lawn or more weed seeds may germinate.

Gently rake the grass with a spring-tined rake, taking care not to tear it. This removes winter debris and lifts grass and weed foliage for efficient cutting.

Bare patches on the lawn attract weeds, so re-sow them in spring. Use a garden fork to break up the soil surface, then firm and level it before applying an appropriate grass seed. Water newly seeded areas regularly, if necessary. Another method for covering bare patches is to use a strip of lawn

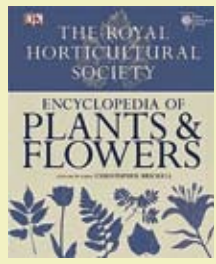


This month's must-have book

The Royal Horticultural Society's *Encyclopedia of Plants & Flowers* by Christopher Brickell

A great Mother's Day gift.

Published by Dorling Kindersley, ISBN 9781405354233



from a rich growing area to patch the bare area (you'll need to re-sow the area where it came from). Avoid frost when carrying out these tasks.

The shrub border

Shrubs grown for their colourful winter stems, *Cornus* (dogwood) and *Salix* (willow) should be pruned now. Cut them back to around 30cm (12 inches), this will allow new coloured stems to grow for next year's colourful display.

In the vegetable garden

"Early" varieties of potatoes can be planted in the early part of the month followed by the main varieties later in March. The shallots and onion sets started into growth in a cool glasshouse can be hardened off ready for planting out. They will still need protection from frost.

In a cold frame its possible to sow some lettuce, carrots, beetroot and other quick growing salad crops.

The fruit garden

Bush and cane fruit are shallow rooting plants and benefit from a good mulching, eg composted green waste applied about 10cm deep to the soil around shrubs and trees. It's a good way to use your recycled green waste from last year's compost bin. Mulching helps prevent weed growth, adds nutrients and prevents valuable moisture loss.



As fruit trees, bushes and canes are beginning to grow this month, feed them with a sprinkling of potassium sulphate fertiliser, also known as sulphate of potash. Use about 15g per square metre, it should be hoed into the soil surface.

It is not too late to plant new fruit trees and bushes, so long as the ground is not too wet, or frozen. Remember to add lots of well-rotted organic matter into the ground before digging the planting hole or trench, again composted green waste is ideal for this. Try to complete all plantings early in the month, to give them time to establish before coming into full growth. Remember to mulch the base of the newly planted trees and bushes with composted green waste.

In the glasshouse and conservatory

Freshen up the look of containers by applying a top dressing of fresh compost also give pots and containers a wash down with warm soapy water. On warm days, open vents and doors of greenhouses to reduce humidity, improve air circulation and help prevent disease. Many conservatory shrubs can be pruned at this time.

Roses

There is still time to plant roses this month. If possible avoid planting in areas where roses were previously grown. Alternatively, when preparing a planting pit, replace the soil with some from another part of the garden, also work in some well rotted compost. After planting, new roses should be pruned backing late March or early April.

Established bush and standard roses must also be pruned at the end of March or early April when there is little chance of severe frosts. Roses will benefit from feeding with a granular rose fertiliser as they come into growth. Use composted green waste to mulch the base of roses in the same way as for fruit trees, this composted green waste could also be mixed with the soil and added to the planting pit.

Other work

Insects start to emerge as temperatures increase. A mild spring can see pest problems developing earlier than usual. Cabbage caterpillars have occasionally been spotted in early spring, and even in late winter (when they may have hatched from eggs laid the previous autumn and survived a mild winter). This is unusual, but with current trends in climate change, is worth bearing in mind in years with mild spring weather.

Start your compost heap – minimise your waste!

With all the old compost used in the garden, start a fresh compost heap or compost bin.

Add all green waste, including vegetable peelings from the kitchen, also add the grass clippings from the lawn and any old discarded bits of plants. A limited quantity of shredded paper can also be added to the compost bin. However, avoid adding woody prunings from roses or shrubs as they will take a long time to rot down.

Continue to feed the birds!

CONTACT WENDY

If you have any gardening queries, please contact Wendy at: info@wmgardendesign.com