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April Gardening Tips

April in the garden means warmer weather and longer days with no fear of frost. We are overflowing with flowering plants and herbs & vegetables - the selection is superb. Anytime this month is a great time to start incorporating soil amendments, sowing seeds, and putting in transplants. The soil is dry enough to be worked without compacting it, the air is warm enough to enjoy working outside and the soil temperature is ideal for germinating all kinds of seeds and getting transplants growing well.

Herbs: If you haven't already, it's time to start a culinary garden with basil, cilantro, chives, curly or Italian parsley, lavender, oregano, sage and thyme! Herbs make great landscaping plants as well. Chives add attractive spear-like foliage among blooming plants. Rosemary and woolly thyme make attractive drought-tolerant trouble-free ground covers. And lavender, well what more needs to be said?

Vegetables: There's just a little time left to plant beets, lettuce and radishes. No need to wait until April to put in heat-lovers such as tomatoes varieties, peppers, melons, eggplant, and okra - there are plenty of warm days ahead of us to get a jump start now. And, of course you can plant year-round crops such carrots, beets, Swiss chard, and radishes.



Garden Chores

Fertilize your plants now as they will grow at a phenomenal rate in the spring. Feed roses, shrubs and trees (just about everything) with a balanced fertilizer. Gro-Power is a great slow-release choice for most everything. Use acid fertilizer on azaleas, gardenias and camellias after they flower. When daffodils and other spring bulbs finish blooming and before leaves wither, give them a shot of fertilizer for next year's flowers. If citrus leaves are looking a little yellow spray them with a liquid chelated iron/zinc mixture or better yet, Gro-Power Citrus & Avocado mix. This is great for gardenias too!

Irrigation Check Up: One way to test how deeply your irrigation water is going: water for the usual length of time and then push a trowel into the soil its full length. Push the soil clump to one side and look at both the depth of the roots and the water line in the soil-it will be dark toward the lawn surface and lighter where it's dry. The water line should be just past the longest roots.

Pinch/Prune: Pinch annuals and perennials for dense growth and more bloom. Prune spring flowering shrubs such as azaleas, camellias, forsythia and lilac when they finish blooming because they bloom on year-old growth. Hedges and shrubs start growing quickly now. Shrubs that have a growth to over 6 feet need frequent pruning during the warm months to keep as a shrub. For flowering shrubs prune after flowering rather than before.

General pruning techniques:

- Plants with small leaves: prune from the outside (like a hedge) with shears.
- Plants with large leaves: cut from the inside removing branches to encourage growth from the inside
- Plants that grow bushy from the ground like oleander: take out entire branches to the ground after bloom.

Mulch: Spring is a great time to apply a compost mulch to your garden. Mulching is one of the best ways to conserve soil moisture, reduce water consumption and control weeds in the flower or vegetable garden. Spread a layer of your favorite compost mulching material around plants that are established but never mulch over a newly planted seedbed as this will cool the soil and delay the germination of seeds.

Roses: Fertilize regularly according to your rose food schedule. Roses start blooming now and cutting stems will encourage more blooms. With blooms starting in April, as you pick cut flowers you are basically pruning. If you always cut with short stems the bush will bloom again sooner but with shorter weaker stems - it's best to choose the middle ground. When the flowers have faded on the bush, deadhead them. This action will bring back flowers on longer stems.

Houseplants: This is a great time to revive your houseplants by re-potting. If they have been in the same pot for several years give them some fresh soil and a new pot. Or if using the same pot clean it out with vinegar and water. Those longer days and higher light mean indoor plants grow faster. Prune to stimulate bushier growth, fertilize and give them extra water.

Pest control

Spider mites are most active in the warmer weather. Spraying with chemical sprays (boo!) can make your problem worse as this will also kill the beneficial insects that help keep the ones you do not want under control. Insecticidal soaps such as Neem oil are the least harmful.

Aphids come in a variety of colors: black, gray, green and yellow. They suck plant fluids from the new foliage leaving the leaves distorted and harming plant growth. Blast plants with a jet of water from a hose. A strong spray will dislodge and drown pests such as aphids, mites and white flies. Don't forget to spray the undersides of leaves. If infestations are heavy try using an insecticidal soap or oil-based product (i.e., Neem oil). Ants protect aphids from natural insect predators that feed on the aphids so wrap sticky barriers to trees and shrubs to prevent colonies from infestation.