



THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence

Whoop! Whoop! The sun is shining! Now we can get going, so gird your loins my gardening friends:

Plant tubers of Jerusalem Artichoke (Topinambour). As well as being edible and used as a root vegetable, these tubers will provide a temporary flowering screen approximately 5ft high. Very useful in a draughty corner or to hide the compost bin!

Weed strawberry beds this month and give the plants a good feed. Use slug pellets or dress the soil under and around the plants with straw to deter slugs and snails.

Cut back hardy Fuchsias, practically to ground level. This will encourage the new, strong shoots to grow better.

Plant shrubs, perennials and rock plants. In the case of Rhododendrons and Azaleas remember they prefer acid soil so dig in and top dress with peat specifically for these plants. Feed established plants.

Prune Forsythia after flowering.

Weed rose beds and mulch with manure/garden compost/moist peat or apply 1/2" grass cuttings to help keep the soil moist.

Dahlias can be planted out this month. Protect new shoots from late frosts.

Scatter slug pellets or egg shells to deter slugs and snails from Hostas and Irises.

Divide and replace congested perennials.

Mow, scarify, weed and feed the lawn. Lower the mower blades gradually over successive cuts to a minimum of 1/2". If you are planning a new lawn, now is the time to sow seed or lay turf.

Control weeds around bush and cane fruits. Feed with proprietary plant foods. Mulch to retain moisture and deter new weeds.

Sow seeds of Beetroot, Brussel Sprouts, Cucumber, Courgettes, Spinach, Runner Beans, Melon, Pumpkin, Rocket (roquette).

Plant onion sets.

Remove rhubarb flowers as soon as they are seen.

Check for pests and diseases. Use sprays at dusk to avoid harming pollinating insects.

Alternatively, you can use stakes at each corner and attach the wire fencing to this. It will be quite stable and roomy and air can circulate. However, because of the air circulation the compost will be drier and take longer to decay so sprinkle with water occasionally to help things along. You can also speed things up initially by adding a couple of spades of finished compost or some shop bought composting agent.

If you need to mulch under shrubs or large herbaceous plants and your compost is not quite ready, don't worry you can still use it – any unsightly larger lumps will be hidden by leaves and foliage but will continue to break down and help the plant. If you have lots of lawn clippings you can use these directly from the mower, so long as no chemical weedkillers have been used on the lawn. Spread them around the plant to retain moisture in the soil.

It's also worth investing in a shredder so you can shred hedge clippings etc, either to use as a mulch or to go into the composter.

While I'm on the subject of avoiding waste, don't forget you can use egg boxes as seed trays – fill with peat and put one or two seeds in each little section. Yoghurt pots or toilet roll tubes are other alternatives. Or – and this is a new one to me – after cutting lemons or oranges in half to juice them you can use the empty skin/shell to plant a couple of seeds in. As with the egg boxes you can then plant the whole thing into pots or straight into the garden when the seeds have germinated and once the weather is good enough.

Another reminder is regarding plastic bottles – clear plastic bottles can be used as mini-greenhouses, either to plant seeds in or to use as a cloche to protect young seedlings; just cut in half, fill half with peat and plant seeds then use the top half as a cloche covering. You can unscrew the bottle lid to let the air circulate as necessary. If you have trouble with moles stand a plastic bottle upright in the mole hole. Take the lid off the bottle and when the wind blows across it the noise will resonate down into the soil and disturb the moles. Hopefully they will take the hint and move on.

Also, I must mention that last month I spoke about growing Asparagus. Since then a friend has pointed out that here in France they seem to prefer white Asparagus. These plants need to be planted deeper in the soil and must be kept earthed up so the light does not get to the spears and start turning them green. (Thank you to Di for that!).

And something else I've learned since last month – Asparagus is a good companion plant for tomatoes because tomatoes repel the asparagus beetle; in return Asparagus repels root nematodes that affect tomato plants.

I really think I need to go and lie down in a darkened room now – my poor head is spinning with all this information ;) **Happy gardening everyone!**

Whilst making notes in readiness for this month's article I realised how often I mention 'mulching' and 'composting', especially at this time of year when we are clearing and weeding flower beds and shrubberies. So, before I go any further I'll give you some ideas for making your own compost container in the garden, which will save you the expense of buying woodchip or peat for mulching your plants, and, more importantly, is environmentally friendly. We are all so concerned with saving our planet, yet so much household rubbish is still thrown away when it could be used in the compost bin.

It's quite simple. For a container 1 metre diameter you will need some plastic coated wire mesh 320 x 100cm. The mesh should be strong enough to stand up on its own when shaped into a cylinder. Join the ends, stand it up in a corner of the garden and start filling.

White asparagus (rear), green asparagus (middle) Bath asparagus (front) © Wikimedia Commons/GearedBull

