



THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence



Spring bulbs©Wikimedia Commons/Johnathan Kington

Well, here we are again with signs of approaching Spring in the garden. Bulbs are coming through so we shall soon have colourful flowers and wildlife is waking up as light levels and temperatures increase. Lovely!

So now, before anything else, spring clean the greenhouse and potting shed to prevent any overwintered pests/diseases appearing as conditions get warmer and more humid.

If you planned your vegetable plot during the darker evenings you will probably already have ordered or bought your seeds and be itching to get going. For those seeds which are sown directly outside you can warm the soil in readiness with cloches or plastic sheeting to help them germinate.

Broad beans, early peas, carrots, beetroot, lettuce and spinach can all be sown now but protect them from the cold, rain and hungry birds by covering with cloches.

Celery, celeriac, aubergines, peppers, tomatoes and outdoor cucumbers can be sown in a heated greenhouse.

Start chitting early potatoes now too. Each seed potato will have a more rounded, blunt end where you will see a number of shoots or 'eyes'. Stand the tubers, blunt end uppermost, in old egg boxes somewhere with plenty of natural light. Sometime next month, when the shoots are 1/2" - 1" long and the soil has warmed up they can be planted out.

Autumn-fruiting raspberry canes can be cut back to ground level now. This will encourage new growth. It's a good opportunity to maintain the supports and wires now too, while you have the space to work.

In the ornamental garden, if you have hedges in need of a trim, do it now, before the birds start nesting. There's nothing worse than finding you have disturbed a nest full of baby birds, wondering if you have frightened the parents away.

Cut back Cornus (Dogwood) shrubs down to about 3" from soil level. This will keep the shrub a good shape and encourage more young red wood for next winter.

Move deciduous trees and shrubs now, before they start active growth again, digging up as much of the rootball as you can. Also, before active growth begins, it's a good time to prune your summer-flowering Clematis to avoid the build up of old, dead wood under this year's new growth.

Deciduous ornamental grasses will benefit from a haircut any time now too. Cut down to about 3" above ground level, but take care not to damage any new emerging growth.

Are you planning on growing Begonias this year? Start the tubers into growth now by placing them just below the surface in trays of damp compost, with the indented side uppermost. Plant out when they are growing well, once all risk of frost has passed.

Feed established flower beds and borders with well-rotted compost and, if you are planting new rose bushes this year, I've read that it's a good idea to add roughly chopped banana skins to the planting hole before the rose goes in. Apparently it improves soil texture, aids moisture retention and adds potassium. (Potassium is an essential for us too, helping to keep the heart, nervous system, muscles, kidneys and bones in good order - bananas contain a high dose of potassium and only about 100 calories per banana, so make this fruit one of your '5-a-day').

Thinking 'health', last month I suggested using Nasturtium flowers and leaves in salads. Now that we have had some sharp frosts these are finished of course, but how about trying Viola tricolor to brighten your winter salad? Also known as 'Heartsease' it grows as a wild flower and is a bit more frost-hardy. Actually, as a herbal remedy this plant is used to treat chest and respiratory problems, skin problems and is a diuretic.

There are many other edible flowers and it's probably possible to find something suitable to decorate food at any time during the year. In March/April you can pick the flowers from primroses and cowslips to add to salads or decorate rice dishes. In May/June you will find marigolds and borage flowers to use as a garnish. July/August is the time for courgette flowers (pick the male flowers, leaving the female ones to produce the courgette). August also gives us runner beans (grow different varieties to provide different coloured flowers). Then in September/October the nasturtiums are back with us again and we have come full circle.

So now, on that happy note, I shall wish you a month of nice weather and happy gardening. Bye for now



Heartsease, Viola Tricolor©Wikimedia Commons/H.Zell