



THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence



Summer Savory © Wikimedia Commons/H.Zell

Not long now before the clocks go forward one hour for Daylight Saving Time - Sunday 29th March at 1am to be exact. I know we lose an hour in bed but how lovely to have the beginnings of lovely long summer evenings and extra time to fit in the gardening jobs at this busy time of the year:

- Harvest the last leeks, Brussel sprouts, cabbages and purple sprouting broccoli
- Plant artichokes, shallots and early potatoes
- Tidy the strawberry bed, replacing old plants which no longer fruit well and cover with a cloche if you wish to encourage early fruiting
- Plant rhubarb and raspberry canes
- Complete the pruning of gooseberry and currant bushes
- Check your seed packets and sow vegetable seeds as instructions dictate, either in the potager, under a cloche or in the greenhouse

If you are sowing broad beans, the herb, Summer Savory (*Satureja hortensis*) is a good companion plant, helping to repel blackfly. It has bronze-green leaves and lilac flowers so looks attractive, but has a mild flavour and can be used as an alternative to sage or thyme. Actually, it is one of the ingredients in Herbes de Provence. As a medicinal herb Summer Savory is used to aid digestion, reduce fevers and soothe bee stings. If you grow it alongside broad beans you can also cook together with broad beans too – gives them a lovely flavour - in fact it is called 'bean herb' in Germany.

In the flower garden it is time to order summer bedding plants and to plan your hanging baskets and window boxes. Don't forget to buy hanging basket liners in readiness. Did you know what a boon disposable nappies can be to tubs, hanging baskets and widow boxes? Simply pour water onto the nappy then remove the outer cover revealing the dampened granules inside. Tip these into your potting compost and they will help retain moisture in the compost during the hot summer months.

Pot-grown shrubs will benefit from top-dressing with a fresh layer of compost. If any need re-potting now is the time to do it and it will give you the chance to tease out the roots which might have become pot-bound. Give them a good feed too.

Sweet peas can be sown directly into their flowering position and, as the soil warms, Dahlias can be planted. They don't have a deep tap root system so are susceptible to wind-rock. It is therefore sensible to put stakes in-situ when you plant the tubers.

Sunflowers are beautiful flowers and bees love them. Instead of growing them singly at the back of the border why not try growing them as a screen and use the tall, strong, stems as supports for

climbing annuals e.g. Morning Glory or even runner beans. Sow the seeds in egg boxes filled with multi-purpose compost. When the seedlings are about 2" tall split the egg boxes and plant each little plant in its 'pot' into 3" pots. Keep them in the cold frame or greenhouse until they are about 1ft tall before planting out in a screening row in the garden.

If you only want the flowers for cutting and flower arranging you can stunt the growth of the plant by pinching out the growing tip when the plant reaches about 8-10". The plant will then only reach 6-8ft in height but will produce about a dozen flowers instead of the one huge flower head. Be sure you pick the best variety of sunflower for your needs as there are so many varieties to choose from.

This time of the year you might well notice strange white cotton-wool-like nests high up in pine trees. These are the nests of Pine Processionary Caterpillars (*Thaumetopoea pityocampa*) so called because of the way they travel through the woods in nose-to-tail columns. The larvae of the Pine Processionary moth live in these nests, coming out at night, nose-to-tail, to feed on pine needles. These larvae should not be handled because the hairs on their bodies cause extreme irritation to humans and animals alike. Sometime towards the end of March the caterpillars are ready to leave the nest for the last time, in their usual long line. They then dig underground and pupate, emerging as the moth at the end of summer. The larvae are eaten by Great Tits, Cuckoos and Beetles. Hoopoes will eat the pupae.



Pine Processionary caterpillar nest © Wikimedia Commons/Mangotome

Another pest which can cause havoc in the garden is the mole. If you have mole hills in your lawns, flower beds or vegetable garden there are several over-the-counter mole repellents but my favourite is to drop garlic cloves down into their tunnels – they don't like the smell. Apparently, castor oil has the same discouraging effect with the addition of giving them an upset tummy.

We mustn't forget to mention slugs either. Wretched things! They will be looking forward to the Hostas sending up new growth as well as all the little plants and seedlings we are tending so carefully. Ash from the fire/wood-burner around susceptible plants acts as a deterrent, as does salt, crushed eggshells and gravel. Be Alert!!

Lastly this month, I will mention Harvey, a reader who asked my advice about removing thick, green moss from his gravel path. We have a similar problem which is usually kept under control using a variety of products: anti-mousse, bleach or glyphosate weedkiller. I did a bit of research and came up with some more alternatives including vinegar, salt, soda crystals, baking powder or garden lime.

In the meantime however, Harvey has spoken to his French neighbour and learned that about 10 days ago he used 'Sulphate de Fer' on his mossy gravel. Stop Press!! The moss has turned black/brown and comes away with ease.

So now we all know what to do to get rid of moss, we shall probably find it is sold out because everyone is buying it..... I'll race you

▶ **Contact Vanda Lawrence**
▶ **Email: amateurgardener@thedeuxsevresmonthly.fr**