

THE AMATEUR GARDENER

by Vanda Lawrence

I've mentioned slugs and snails but another noticeable pest at this time of the year are moles. They eat insect grubs and earthworms and their tunnel-runs, visible just beneath the surface of the soil (or more noticeably in the lawn) are their feeding tunnels. The other runs are deeper, uniting the feeding tunnels and it is the soil excavated from these deep tunnels which appear as unsightly surface mounds. Underground the runs can cause damage to plant roots.

In the lawn you can try burying garlic cloves in the tunnels to deter them – they don't like the smell. Alternatively, pour in castor oil – they don't like the smell and it gives them an upset stomach which also encourages them to move on. You can also buy smelly granules or sonic mole deterrents.



In the flower and vegetable gardens the following ideas might help:

- Bulbs such as Daffodil, Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*) or *Fritillaria imperialis* 'Lutea' – the scent of this bulb resembles that of a fox, so no wonder moles don't like them.
- Allium family – garlic, onions, leeks, chives, shallots, ornamental flowering onions.
- *Euphorbia lathyris* aka 'mole plant'. This is a biennial growing up to 1.5m tall, but be aware that all parts of the plant are poisonous and can cause skin irritation on handling.
- Castor oil plant, (*Ricinus communis*) but take care because the seeds are poisonous.

I'm running out of space now but can't go before reminding you to start chitting your potatoes. Choose **earlies** if you only have a small vegetable plot so you can plant salads after the potatoes have been lifted. **Second earlies** take about 16 weeks to mature so you will be cropping from late June to early August. **Maincrop** are ready about 20 weeks after planting ie July-October. They take up most space in the garden but tend to be the best varieties for storage.

If you have dogs or cats please be aware of the dangers of the Pine Processionary Caterpillars which make white cotton-wool-like nests high up in pine trees. The hairs on their bodies cause extreme irritation to humans and animals alike. Towards the end of March the caterpillars leave the nest in a long, nose-to-tail line and this is when our pets could be at risk.

Lastly, I'll remind you that the clocks go forward on Saturday night 26th/Sunday morning 27th March at 1am. I know, I know ... we lose an hour in bed but what joy to have lighter evenings again.

Happy March everyone.



At last! Spring flowers are showing themselves in the garden and hedgerows, longer days, improved temperatures ... what a lift for the spirits. Now it becomes a pleasure to work in the garden again, instead of just working through the 'to do' list.

Have you ever thought about growing your own Asparagus? Definitely not for the faint-hearted but worth the trouble when you consider that, once established, asparagus plants will produce tender, tasty spears for up to twenty years!

Before planting it is critical that your new asparagus bed is completely free of perennial weeds and grasses because asparagus roots are quite near the surface and can be easily damaged by digging or hoeing to remove weeds later in the season.

Plant asparagus crowns in March. Dig a trench 12" wide x 8" deep. Work in well-rotted manure to the bottom of the trench then cover with a 2" layer of the excavated soil plus some organic fertilizer. Next, make a 4" ridge of soil down the centre of the trench and place the crowns on top of this ridge, about 12-18" apart, draping the roots evenly down the sides of the ridge. Replace the rest of the soil leaving the bud tips just visible. Leave 18" between rows and stagger plants between adjacent rows. Water well and mulch with shredded leaves, straw or other weed-free organic matter.

Pests include slugs and snails so be vigilant and keep them at bay with salt, gravel, crushed egg-shells or ash from a coal fire.

Do not harvest for the first 2 years, but in the third year harvest spears from mid-April for 4-6 weeks. From then on you can harvest for 6-8 weeks from mid-April. Pick too much and plants will not be able to develop a strong root system and energy reserves for the next season.

To harvest, simply cut individual spears with a sharp knife 1" below the soil surface when the spears are about 5-7" high. Harvest every two or three days for the best quality spears.

Once harvesting has ended in late spring/early summer allow the spears to develop naturally. They will reach 4-6 ft high with lacy green foliage. These fronds will turn yellow in the autumn, when you can cut them down to about an inch above ground level. Remove this cut growth from the area in order to help keep pests such as the asparagus beetle from overwintering in the bed.