

GARDENING TIPS FOR APRIL AND MAY 2015

I have just (March 4th) been up to the garden. The sun is shining and things are starting to show signs of waking up. Daffodils and narcissi are about 6 inches above ground, primulas are in flower (brave little things) and shoots are showing on the newly-planted raspberries (though we will not see any fruit this year: we must wait until they are well established).

The birds are quite lively and eating well. I have quite a job keeping up with them! My favorite lady blackbird comes to me as soon as I enter the garden and gives me the nod that she likes mealworms and chopped up dried apricots. I also put out a mixture of chopped peanuts, biscuits and lard, which I stuff into holes in some small logs which are hung in the trees. The blackbirds get quite acrobatic when they are hungry, I often wonder whether all the effort they put in is offset by the amount of food they get.

The keen gardeners amongst you will have started planting seeds indoors, ready for planting out later. My onions, garlic and shallots have overwintered well and I look forward to harvesting around June or July.

I still have a lot of pruning to do. One or two of the shrubs have suffered a bit by being weighed down with the recent snow. I will have to get it done before too long.

The advertising is now in the papers for the annual spring shows. It's always worth a visit, to see what is new and to see the wonderful displays of spring flowers - and you may pick up some tips or see some labour-saving devices being demonstrated. I always have a laugh at any demonstration for earth-digging tools! When I see the box of earth they use, you could dig it up with your hands! I don't think some of them would last long in my soil. From now on it's the time to keep dealing with the weeds. Try and catch them before they get a good hold - choose a warm sunny day (ha ha!) - and hoeing will nobble the annual weeds without too much effort. The more sturdy weeds like dandelions or clover will have to be dug out.

The fish are just starting to stir after their winter semi-hibernation. I expect the frogs will soon be in the pond. They make a mess by stirring up the mud - the fish have to be a bit slick to avoid their amorous advances! I have lost one or two fishes this way.

April and May are possibly the busiest periods in the gardeners calendar, so don't just sit there! Get cracking and don't forget, as you do your hoeing, digging, pruning etc, that all that activity is doing you good (ow me back!)

April

Flowers: Prepare supports for your perennials especially the taller varieties such as lupin, delphiniums and oriental poppies. Complete the planting of herbaceous perennials and continue planting gladioli corms for a succession of blooms. Alpine plants can be moved and replanted now. Give roses a good feed (Tonks formula is recommended) and this will encourage first-class blooms right through the season. Sow hardy annuals, plant out sweet peas and give them a good supporting frame. Pansies and violas can be planted now if they have been properly hardened off: a cool semi-shaded place will give a longer life to the flowers. Start dahlias in a frame, covering the tubers with light soil and water sparingly. Keep well ventilated unless frost is forecast. Plant out antirrhinums and penstemon once they are hardened off. Clematis can be planted now - a good pot grown specimen is best. Keep all beds weed-free and mulch them to make it easier to retain moisture.

Vegetables: Finish planting early potatoes at the beginning of the month. Plant second earlies at the end of the month. Sow Brussels sprouts, late summer and autumn cabbage and cauliflower in a seed-bed, and small rows of lettuce and radish every three weeks to avoid a glut. Feed spring cabbages which are near maturity with a top dressing of nitrate of soda and hoe it in, and another dressing in three weeks' time. Plant onion sets 4" to 6" (10-15 cm) apart in rows about 30cm (1 ft) apart. Prepare trenches for runner beans with plenty of humus and other moisture-retaining material in the bottom. Sow parsley outdoors but don't forget that carrot-fly grubs love parsley, so make a fleece tent to prevent the fly getting to it. For those of you who grow celery, prepare trenches now, unless you grow the self-blanching variety. If you want a few early French beans, sow a few now in pots, and place them in a greenhouse - they need about 13 degrees C (55 degrees F) to germinate. The seedlings will be hardened off later on for planting out in late May. Sow main crop carrots, thinly, in drills about ½" (1 cm) deep and 12" (30 cm) apart. If carrot-fly is about, make a fleece tent to prevent attack. Sow globe beetroot in a fairly sheltered border out of doors - it need not be a large sowing, as it will be followed by another one in May.

Sow seeds 15 cm (6") apart in rows 30cm (12") apart. Sow seeds in threes and reduce the seedlings to one at each point later on.

Trees, Shrubs and Fruit: Watch out for disease in apples and pears. If scab and mildew were present last year, spray when leaves start to show and continue this over one month. Nimrod T or Supercurb should help to control it. Renew mulches around bushes, cane fruits and rhubarb. Make sure that newly-planted trees and shrubs are kept moist during dry spells. Forsythia, winter jasmine, flowering currant and other winter flowering shrubs can be cut back to within a few buds of the old growth once the flowers have finished. Prune late flowering clematis and also hybrid T and floribunda roses

Greenhouse and Indoor Plants: Sensitive plants should be protected by shading from strong sunlight. It's a bit early to use the side vents on your greenhouse, as most plants under glass hate draughts particularly during early development. Prick off seedlings as soon as they can be handled carefully - do not let them get too deep-rooted, as this will cause them to check their growth when transplanted. Pot on seedlings pricked out earlier. Take cuttings of winter flowering begonia, rest freesias, lachenalias, arum lilies and cyclamen. Place them on a shelf near the glass and gradually reduce the watering, pinch out the tips of chrysanthemum cuttings on those required for spring flowering. Plant tomatoes, cucumbers, capsicum, etc in a heated greenhouse - maintain a temperature of minimum 55 degrees F, otherwise wait a few weeks and buy plants ready brought on. Watch out for all the creepy crawlies and deal with them as soon as they appear. Ants and woodlice can wreck a tray of seedlings overnight! Gently wash leaves of indoor foliage plants except the furry leafed kind and put them outside in a warm rain shower. Pot on geraniums and young plants like begonias and gloxinias, feed established plants regularly and split up and re-pot ferns.

Lawns: Keep all grassed areas clean. Spike, aerate and