

The Garden in April

By Rachel Anderson

April is such an industrious month! Birds are busy building nests, bees are out and about pollinating and building up their colonies, and slugs are on the warpath once again. It's all happening in tune with the drone of the gardener's lawn mowers and the creak of sore backs bent low over the garden beds. It feels good though, doesn't it? It's so nice to be outside in the sunny now, cloudy a moment later weather that nobody seems to mind that the lunch hour has come and gone and the sun will be going down soon, setting the stage for the frogs to begin singing their love songs for all to hear. Industrious as spring is, it's also very peaceful.

In the ornamental garden:

- If you've learned a thing or two about eating weeds since last garden notes, then don't weed your garden- except to get rid of the ones you can't eat. If, however, you're still not sure, then weed away. Weeds (like most plants in April) grow at the speed of light, so it's best to keep at it. It must seem like I'm always talking about weeds, but they're such a constant part of gardening and to expect a completely weed free garden is, in my opinion, unrealistic. They're there regardless, so you might as well embrace the inevitable. While you're embracing, my favorite tool for weed annihilation is the Japanese weeder called a hori-hori knife, my number one, can't live without gardening tool.
- If you haven't pruned your fruit trees or roses by now, then get at it. If you wait too long with your roses, they will bloom later than others, and you'll be standing there wondering why your neighbors have glorious blooms and you don't. Also, April is a great time to do that first fertilizing of the roses. Use a slow release organic rose fertilizer/alfalfa meal combo for great roses all season long. (Be sure to use alfalfa meal and not alfalfa pellets-like rabbit food-as they contain salts that can be damaging to your roses).
- Early spring is a good time to spread mulch. Whatever material you choose to use, it will help you immensely when it comes to weed control and will help to retain moisture in the soil, reducing your need to water during the driest months of summer.
- Once the flowers have faded from your daffodils, you can remove the withered blossom but leave the foliage until it dies back on its own. You'll be really tempted to cut them back to the ground because, honestly, they don't look so pretty. But by leaving the foliage, the bulb is fed (via photosynthesis) and a new flower is formed in the bulb for the next year. My friend Anna likes to take the clumps of dying foliage and braid it. Braiding helps to keep the foliage from lying flat on the soil (which looks messy) with the added benefit of looking kind of sculptural. It's actually pretty neat looking!
- April is a great time to plant Dahlia tubers and Lily bulbs. Usually by now the soil has warmed and dried out enough so they don't just sit there and rot. If your soil is still super soggy, wait a bit longer or consider planting in pots. There were a couple of prolonged spells of dry freezing weather without the benefit of insulating snow cover this winter, which is the enemy of Dahlias (and lots of other plants, actually), so if you've overwintered yours in the ground keep a close sign for tips of new growth, keeping in mind that Dahlias don't usually break dormancy until around late April. Try to resist the urge to poke around in the soil. If you really think you've lost yours, then come on over to the nursery- we have an excellent selection to help replace any that you lost.
- Put out slug bait! All this tender juicy new growth is very tempting to slugs and snails.
- We have been getting in lots of new basket stuffers and fuchsias throughout March and April, which is incredibly tempting for all you gardeners wanting to get a jump on your hanging baskets and containers. Just a word of caution: Do not plant these tender babies outside right now! It's still too cold at night, and if the temperatures don't kill them, they'll just sit there and sulk and look sorry and pathetic. Don't do it. Our last frost date around here is generally around April 20, depending on where

you are. Even then, nights can still be chilly so use caution. However, if you are so lucky as to have a greenhouse or a sunny enclosed porch, then by all means, get started!

- Lastly, if you're bored, or needing a bit of inspiration, or feeling blue, stop by the nursery and stroll the aisles. We've got so many gorgeous new and fresh plants right now that you'd probably be wise to pack a lunch and stay awhile! Or better yet, buy crepes and lemonade from the gal selling them at the nursery throughout April in honor of the Tulip Festival!

In the edible garden:

- April is a very exciting time in the veggie garden! The possibilities are endless!
- Remove old unproductive raspberry canes. By now they've pushed growth and it's easy to tell which ones are dead and which are still productive.
- Prune out the oldest wood on blueberries, currants, and gooseberries. This makes way for fresh, new, productive wood.
- It should be safe to sow all kinds of veggie seeds directly out in the garden: carrots, cilantro, radishes, broccoli, beets, spinach, kale, Swiss chard, peas...shall I go on?
- Resist the urge to plant out tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and basil unless you're planning on planting them in a greenhouse. Our days are warming up, but our nights are still way too chilly for these sensitive plants. Remember, our last frost date is generally not until the end of this month depending on where you live, and even then nights can be too cold. The rule of thumb for tomatoes and relatives here in the PNW is Mother's Day if you can stand to wait that long. Basil outdoors? Wait until June or plant in pots to help maximize heat retention.
- It's also a great time to sow edible flowers like nasturtiums, calendula, and borage. Borage, by the way, is very attractive to many beneficial insects, including many types of bees, which are a very good thing to have in the garden.
- Have I mentioned slug bait? There's nothing more infuriating than stepping out one morning to find that your pea seedlings have all been devoured overnight by slugs and /or snails. There's usually nothing left but a shimmery trail of slime and an empty seed row.
- Peek around the asparagus bed. Are they up yet?
- Fertilize garlic. Side-dress with an organic, slow release fertilizer.

Enjoy the anticipation that comes with waiting for seeds to germinate and the excitement when they finally have.

At the end of the day when you're resting your weary bones, take a moment to savor the sweet scent of new growth and warming soil.