

In The Garden In February

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturist

I realize it's winter, but it doesn't feel like it. I think I have spring fever, but it's only February. Our winters are very misleading. There are Crocus and *Iris reticulata* in full bloom, winking and smiling coyly, whispering sweet nothings to me when I pass by. It's all I can do to resist the temptation to jump wholeheartedly, with both feet, into their arms. They're so cute! And colorful! And brazen! Every year they lure me into a false sense of gardening get up and go, and every year I pull out my new seed packets and my hoe and fertilizer, sun hat and boots, only to find myself all dressed up for a party that hasn't really gotten started yet. In my eagerness I forget that winter is a cruel player that toys with me, one day sending sunshine and temperatures in the upper 50's with bees buzzing and birds chirping and the next day executing a perfect about face with dark clouds, icy rain and enough of a chill in the air to keep me indoors with my head under the covers. All day. I never learn. And the Crocus and Iris? Where are they throughout all the ups and downs of February in Western Washington? They're still there, toughing it out, smiling through it all with the spirit of true belief in their heart of hearts that spring, with all its music, really is coming. Their whisperings I mistook as sweet nothings were actually words of wisdom to the gardener; hold steady, don't get discouraged, spring will be here soon and it will be perfect.

In the garden:

- If you desperately need inspiration and the Crocus and Iris aren't doing it for you, then get thee to the Northwest Flower and Garden Show! It runs February 11-15. Tickets are \$17 up until the first day of the show, then they go up to \$22. If you cannot find something to get excited about there, well, I really can't imagine that outcome. There are tons of great classes with great speakers, dazzling gardens set up to amaze and inspire. The amazing part is all the flowers! It's like you've gone in a time machine and been transported several months ahead into actual spring! There are flowering shrubs, bulbs, and perennials, and the deciduous trees all have bright green leaves thanks to the miracle of forcing! And there are loads of cool plants and gardening gadgets to buy. It's really fun!
- Look for summer flowering bulbs, like dahlias, lilies, and crocosmia. Don't plant the dahlias quite yet, though; it's best to wait until the end of March or beginning of April to protect against any hard freezes that may creep up.
- Buy and sow sweet pea seeds! Where we live in Western Washington, this annual flowering vine is traditionally sown on or around Valentine's Day, but if you don't get around to it right away or if the weather is too wet or the ground is frozen, then they can still be sown through March and into April. As the seeds begin to germinate, put down slug bait to help protect them from hungry slugs and snails that have been waiting all winter for such a tender treat.
- Plant bare root lilacs, hydrangeas, red twig dogwood, flowering currant and more! The selection at Christianson's is great right now and the timing is perfect!
- February is the time to prune roses, fruit trees and summer flowering shrubs. Take care not to prune spring bloomers like lilac, forsythia, or flowering currant because you'll prune away this seasons flowers. Wait to do those until after they've bloomed, but before they've set new buds for next year. The how's and when's of pruning can be pretty confusing and if you're in doubt ask for help, or you can take one of the many classes that are offered at the nursery over the next several months.
- This winter has been pretty mild and I've noticed most deciduous ornamental grasses like *Miscanthus* and *Hakonechloa* are sending up new shoots a little earlier than usual, so go ahead and cut back your deciduous grasses to 6 inches or so. I like to tie the taller varieties tightly with twine before I begin, which keeps the grass from falling loosely all over the place, requiring more cleanup when I'm through.

- Get out and pull any weeds before they send up flowers and go to seed. The tidy rosettes of shot weed will begin to bloom before you know it. If you didn't spread mulch in the fall, then once you've weeded put down a thick layer of compost to help delay the arrival of more weeds and to help conserve soil moisture during the summer.

In the veggie garden:

February is a very exciting time in the vegetable garden because it's when we can actually get out there again and grow food! If you've been able to eat from your yard all winter long, then congratulations! That's not always an easy thing to accomplish since a winter food garden requires a fair bit of planning and space in summer when winter is usually the last thing on most people's minds. I garden on a generous city lot in Anacortes, so I know that when summer is in full swing, space in the veggie garden is at a premium and it's not always easy to dedicate some of it to food that won't be eaten until much later; that is, if the crop makes it that far. From a vegetable gardening point of view, I love February. It's a fresh start. I can't wait to get the first peas in the ground; that's my favorite part. It's almost ceremonial to me, because I know that it's just the beginning of a long season of growing.

- Before you go too crazy in the garden, take note of the condition of your soil. We've had a lot of rain these past few months and the soil may be too wet to work with. I like to do what I call the 'ball test' which goes like this: dig down a few inches and scoop out a handful of soil. Roll it into a ball and then toss it gently up into the air and catch it in your palm. If the soil holds its shape, then it's too wet to work. If the soil ball falls apart in your hands, then you're good to go. If the soil is too wet, wait for a few days of dry weather and try the test again. Sometimes just a few days is all you need.
- Plant bare root rhubarb, asparagus, artichokes, strawberries, blueberries, grapes, currants, and horse radish. Now is also a great time to plant bare root fruit trees.
- Sow things like snow peas, snap peas, and fava beans outdoors. These tough plants can tolerate cold, wet soil better than others, but if we have a stretch of freezing weather they may just bide their time until conditions seem favorable. It's helpful this time of year to have a soil thermometer. Knowing the temperature of the soil early in the season will help to determine whether it's a good time to sow seeds or not. For example, peas germinate best if the top 2 inches of soil is between 50-60 degrees, which is typical for February. Also, if the weather is especially soggy over a long period, there is a chance the seeds will rot, so keep an eye on the weather and your soil. Replant if necessary. Make sure to protect your freshly sown seeds from birds (they love pea seeds for some reason) by covering the row with a strip of chicken wire or other deterrent. Also, protect emerging seedlings from slugs and snails by putting out some slug bait as the seeds germinate.
- Plant garlic now for a late summer to early fall harvest. Again, make sure the soil isn't too soggy. Raised beds are very helpful for getting things going early in the season as they tend to dry out sooner and warm up faster than beds that are in the ground.

Be hardy like the crocus and try not to let the weather deter you from getting into the garden this month. It's okay to get dressed up in your garden uglies in anticipation of the season ahead, even if the weather forces you to retreat back indoors. Make tea, make plans, or just crawl back into bed and pull the covers all the way up. That's perfectly acceptable.