

The Garden In April

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturist

Hang on to your hats everyone! Spring has officially begun and the fever is running high. I realize that it has been feeling like Spring for over a month now, but for me there's something about April that's really inspiring. Maybe it's the chirps and whistles heralding the return of the song birds even as the swans and geese begin their long journey back north. Or, maybe it's the sweet smell of green growing things just emerging combined with the drone of lawn mowers that makes it feel certain. Maybe it's all of those things plus something else that is a little more difficult to pin down. A renewed sense of industry and wellbeing perhaps, or the soft light of the sun as it reveals itself following a dark downpour. Whatever it is, it feels good and I'm looking forward to experiencing the rest of the season.

In the ornamental garden:

- Patrol for slugs. They will make short work of any newly emerging perennials, bulbs, and seedlings.
- Once the flowers have faded from your daffodils, you should remove the withered blossoms but leave the foliage alone until it turns brown. You'll be tempted to cut the unsightly foliage to the ground, but by leaving it the bulb is being fed and a flower bud will form for next year. Try planting low growing perennials in front of daffodils to help hide the foliage as it goes dormant. I like to use lady's mantle, hardy geraniums and cat mint (especially 'Walker's Low').
- Weeds (like most plants in April) grow at the speed of light, so be sure to keep on top of it. If you didn't manage to spread mulch in the fall, then now is a good time to do it. Mulching will really help to keep weeds in check while also protecting plant roots, feed the soil and help retain soil moisture.
- A word of warning: If you've been to the nursery recently (or any garden center really) then you've probably noticed that annuals have begun to appear on the benches. Don't be tempted by the petunias or fuchsias just yet though! Our days and nights are just too cool right now for them to be able to grow and thrive. They may not die outright, at least not at first. They will sit there and shiver and turn purple with cold and if they don't die, they will at least have a difficult time recovering. Unless you have a cozy greenhouse to keep these babies, then I would wait until the beginning of May. I know how exciting it is to see all that potential color available, but it really is best to be patient in this instance.
- Fertilize roses. I usually do it when I prune in March, but April is not too late to get it done. I like to use a combination of alfalfa meal and a slow release rose and flower food. I mix them together in a bucket and scratch it into the soil around the drip line of the roses. It seems to work really well!
- Plant Dahlia tubers and Lily bulbs; however if you know that your soil is still really soggy it would be best to wait a bit longer to plant so they don't just rot.
- Carefully trim away the old leaves of ferns so as to not remove the newly emerging fronds. This task is usually best done in March while the new fronds are still tightly furled, but if you never got to it, it's better to do it now than not at all. Ferns just look so beautiful when the old stuff is cut away!

In the veggie garden:

- Prune out 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 growing 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. If you have a green house, then you are able to get a jump start on these veggies and a lot of other ones too.
- 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.
- Fertilize garlic. Side-dress with an organic, slow release fertilizer. I like to use rose and flower food on mine.

Remember that April 22 is Earth Day; plan to plant something special on that day in celebration!