



Garden Tips for March 2016

by Anne Skinner, UC Master Gardener Program

Spring is just around the corner and March is one of the busiest months in the garden! But beware of fickle weather and watch out for the chance of a late frost. March 15 is a reliable date for home gardeners to "let the planting of warm season annuals begin." There are a few exceptions to postpone planting until April, when soils are warmer. You'll find them listed below.

Annual flowers: Sow seeds or plant seedlings of ageratum, alyssum, bachelor buttons, begonia, celosia, cleome, coleus, cosmos, dusty miller, gomphrena, impatiens, lobelia, marigolds, nasturtiums, nicotiana, petunias, portulacas, salvias, and verbena. You can plant seeds of zinnias indoors now, but wait for warmer weather before planting in the garden. We still need to be water-wise, so instead of mass plantings of annuals, try growing your favorites in a small area around your front door or in pots. I have a few large pots in my back garden and two on my front porch, so I can still have that wonderful spring color, but save water too. Try collecting water in a bucket from the kitchen sink or shower while waiting for it to get warm, and use this to water your pots.



Bulbs: Summer blooming bulbs such as cannas, caladium, calla lily, crocosmia, dahlia, gladiolus, liatris, Oriental lilies, ranunculus, tuberose and zephyranthes should be set in ground now. Set out gladiola corms over several weeks to extend the bloom time. Buy the caladiums now, but wait to plant until soil is warmer, otherwise they may rot.

Citrus: Grapefruit, kumquats, lemons, oranges, mandarins, pomelos and tangelos all do well in Tulare County and need just a little more frost protection in Kings County. Limes can also be grown, but are more frost sensitive. This is a fabulous month to plant citrus in your garden. If you already have citrus trees, prune any branches that are touching the ground to prevent access to ants, slugs and snails. Use a sticky ant barrier like "Tanglefoot" on the trunk to control ants, which tend aphids, whitelies, and soft scale (see critter control below).

Herbs: Plant chives, cilantro, dill, French tarragon, oregano, lavender, mint (in a pot), parsley, rosemary, sage and thyme. Be sure to plant them in a sunny location. Luckily, most herbs prefer dry conditions, so they are perfect to grow with the new water restrictions. Wait until next month to plant basil when the soil is warmer.

Houseplants: With spring comes a new flush of growth, so it's time to fertilize your house plants with a diluted solution of soluble indoor plant food. Add a little time-release fertilizer for good measure. Pinch growing tips to promote thick bushy growth. Be sure to turn houseplants each week when you water to get balanced growth. We've all seen those plants that look great on one side and naked on the other side.

Perennials: Artemisia, brachycome, butterfly bush, coneflower, coral bells, coreopsis, daylilies, diascia, dianthus, euphorbia, felicity, geraniums, ornamental grasses, penstemon, ornamental sweet potato, phlox,

salvias, Santa Barbara daisy, sea thrift, and yarrow can be planted in the spring. This is just a small sample of what can be planted, so visit your local nursery for even more ideas.

Veggies: Plant seeds or seedlings of beets, carrots, chard, lettuce, peas, radishes and tomatoes. Garlic cloves and seed potatoes can also be planted. Start seeds of bell peppers, chili peppers, and eggplants indoors and then transplant them outdoors in April. Wait until April to seed okra, sweet corn and all cucurbits (cucumbers, melons, and squash).

Critter Control: Be vigilant. It is easier to win the "bug war" when you catch them early. Patrol for slugs and snails. Either hand pick them or set out chemical baits. Baits containing metaldehyde are extremely toxic to kids, pets and wildlife, while baits containing iron phosphate are non-toxic to all. Spittle bugs are occasionally an unsightly nuisance, but do little damage. They look like little blobs of wet foam with a small bug in the middle. Wash them off with the hose. Keep watch for aphids that quickly build up on the tender new growth and blast them with the hose or insecticidal soap. Remember to control ants in plants and trees. Ants feed on the honeydew that aphids, whitefly and soft scale insects produce. In exchange, the ants protect these pests from harm by chasing away beneficial insects that are preying on the pest insects. Eliminating ants will help biological or nature's control efforts and reduce insect damage on your plants.

Garden Chores:

- Spring rains will encourage rapid growth of weeds so hand pull or hula-hoe before they flower and set seed.
- Fertilize roses and perennials that are emerging from winter dormancy.
- Prune spring flowering shrubs such as forsythia, spirea and quince after they bloom.
- Trim hedges to retain their shape. Keep them narrower at the top and wider at the bottom so plants get maximum light to prevent bald spots.
- Start to train vines and climbers so they don't get out of control. Construct trellises for beans, cucumbers, peas, tomatoes, and ornamental vines.
- Check irrigation equipment. Soon it will be time to water again. Fix faucets, valves and sprinkler heads. Check drip systems, sprinklers and hoses.

Visit nurseries often, so when new plants arrive you can get the best pick, plus see what new plants or varieties have become available. Most of all get out there this March and enjoy working in your garden.

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