

Spring Garden Housekeeping: What to Do Now

By Maggie Mah

Spring along the Northern California Coast can be unpredictable. Without summer's marine layer, it can be warm and sunny during the day and very chilly once the sun goes down. It can be rainy and wet or bone dry. Or all the above! It's good to be prepared for just about anything and focus on getting ready for the months ahead when the weather pattern settles down. Here are things to do right now that will serve you well in the months ahead.

Weeding: It's Good for the Soul

Pull those weeds now while the ground is still moist (it's so much easier!) and before pesky plants can scatter their seeds for next year. Although it might seem like drudgery, try thinking of this simple repetitive act as a very constructive form of meditation! Once the unwanted vegetation is gone, put down a new layer of mulch around (not on!) plants you want to maintain. The mulch will suppress weeds, conserve moisture, and gradually add nutrients to the soil.

Feed Almost Everything.

Many landscape plants can use a good feeding now--everything except California natives! Manzanitas, ceanothus and other native plants, which are so glorious this time of year, will soon start to slow down in preparation for the dry summer months ahead when the plants require fewer nutrients. However, roses and other summer bloomers are getting ready for show time so the time to start feeding is now. Choose good organic fertilizer with balanced nutrients for each type of plant. Roses love alfalfa, which supplies them with nitrogen and other essential nutrients. An inexpensive way to add alfalfa is in the form of pellets designed for horse and rabbit feed. Check your local feed store for alfalfa pellets without added sugar or molasses.

Getting in shape

The best time to prune camellias and rhododendrons is after they have finished blooming, usually early to mid-March. Trimming and tidying now gives the plants time to produce new growth before the next bloom cycle. After they have flowered, give them a boost of nitrogen with diluted fish emulsion and an application of organic azalea/camellia/gardenia food. It's also the best time to shop for new camellias, rhododendrons, and azaleas.

Let it be

Resist the temptation to remove the foliage from spent winter and early spring blooming bulbs such as paper whites and daffodils. It might look messy, but those yellowing leaves are supplying the bulbs with food through photosynthesis and re-charging them for next year. After flowering, let the stems wither (braid them if you must!) and know that patience will be rewarded with even better bulbs next year.

Make your Beds

It's still too early to plant tomatoes and other summer vegetables outside, but it's a great time to prepare the soil. Add 3 to 4 inches of organic compost to your garden beds and dig it in well. You can also add worm castings and a good, all-purpose organic fertilizer for extra nutrients. Do this now to allow microorganisms in the soil to get established for transplanting seedlings in mid-April.

Plan now for summer color:

Plant summer blooming bulbs like gladiolas and dahlias now for a surprise of color later. Also add annuals like cosmos, marigolds, zinnias, and sunflowers to attract beneficial insects. Tip for fall: when these plants are done blooming, don't pull them up, cut them off at ground level and let the roots gently decompose and enrich the soil over the winter.

Test the water:

The time to check your irrigation system is now—before warmer weather descends in earnest. Check for leaks, malfunctioning or damaged emitters and sprinklers as well as any tubing that might have become dislodged. Remove sprinkler heads and other fittings from upright pipes and allow water to flow for a second or two to flush out dirt, debris and the occasional earwig.

Mark Your Calendar:

April 9th, 2022 for the San Mateo-San Francisco Master Gardener Spring Garden Market and Educational Fair at the San Mateo County Event Center in San Mateo.

For more information on the Spring Garden Market go to: <mailto:https://smsf-mastergardeners.ucanr.edu>

This article was written by UC Master Gardener, Maggie Mah and edited by UC Master Gardener, Cynthia Nations.