



Garden Tips for April 2016

by Thea Fiskin, UC Master Gardener

At long last spring has finally arrived! With the danger of frost behind us, we can begin planting in the garden. April is a month when garden centers are usually well stocked with new plants, and it's a great time to check them out. Whether you are buying seedlings in six-packs or 4 inch pots, and shrubs in 1 or 5 gallon pots, remember bigger is not always better. Quality is what is important. Look for dark green leaves, a thick stalk, and no yellowing or shriveling. It is tricky, but look for healthy roots and avoid plants that are root bound or circling within the pot.



WHAT TO PLANT

Annuals: Choose plants that are going to give you color into the fall. Avoid planting snapdragons, pansies or primroses, or any other cool-season annuals as their season is almost over. Look for ageratum, blanket flower, cleome, cockscomb (celosia), cosmos, marigold, moss rose (portulaca), petunias, salvias, sunflowers, and zinnias for those sunny areas. In your shady locations try coleus and impatiens. Even with all of the rain we are still in a severe drought so avoid large masses of annuals and concentrate your color in small areas.

Bulbs: Fall isn't the only time to plant bulbs. Caladiums, calla lilies, cannas, and gladiola should be planted in spring. All can be grown in the sun except caladiums, which are my go to plant for adding pizzazz to pots in my shaded areas. Plant them and water sparingly until they sprout. Caladiums don't have flowers but their large leaves have amazing colors, including cream to neon pink, red, silver and bright greens.

Herbs: Time to plant basil, bee balm, cilantro, chives, lavender, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sages and thyme. Most of these herbs do better in the ground and make handsome, drought tolerant shrubs. An exception is mint which should be grown in a pot with a saucer to prevent it from taking over your garden.

Houseplants: Rotate your houseplants so they receive sunlight on all sides. Pinch back the tips of foliage to stimulate new growth and keep plants full rather than long and leggy. Spring clean to keep them healthy, removing any spent flowers, dead or yellowing leaves. With the exception of African violets (and other plants with "hairy leaves") large dusty leaves should be wiped with a damp sponge.

Perennials: Bedding begonias, coneflower, coral-bells, coreopsis, daises, dianthus, geraniums, hollyhock, lantanas, salvias, verbena and wallflower are a few of the perennials that can be added to your garden.

Vegetables: In early April there's still time for beets, lettuce and radishes, all planted from seed. In late April after the soil has had time to warm up, plant the heat-loving vegetables such as beans, corn, cucumber, eggplant, melons, okra, peppers, summer squash and tomatoes.

GARDEN CHORES

- Fertilize lawns, roses, shrubs and trees, just about everything, with a balanced fertilizer.
- Use acid fertilizer on azaleas, gardenias, and rhododendrons after they flower.
- When spring bulbs finish flowering, snip off old blooms and fertilize. Do not trim foliage on bulbs until leaves have turned yellow, which allows plants to store nutrients for next year.
- Pinch annuals and perennials for dense growth and more blooms.
- If citrus leaves are puny or showing dark green veins with pale middles, then spray them with a liquid chelated iron/zinc mixture. This also works on gardenias too.
- Prune spring flowering shrubs: Azaleas, camellias, forsythia, lilac and flowering quince. Since they bloom on year old growth, they will have the entire year to develop new wood. A good rule of thumb when pruning any shrub or tree is to prune to shape and don't remove any more than 1/3 of the growth.

CRITTER CONTROL

- If cutworms are a problem, put collars around seedlings using recycled household items, such as yogurt containers with the bottom removed or toilet paper tubes cut in half.
- Encourage beneficial insects by planting alyssum, anise, black-eyed susan, cosmos, dill, fennel, feverfew, fleabane and yarrow.
- Be alert for both insect pests and predators. Do not spray if beneficial insects such as lady beetles are present.
- Handpick snails and slugs. They are easier to find early in the morning or early evening.

Spring is the season to be outside, simply enjoying Mother Nature. Make a habit of sipping your morning coffee or afternoon tea outside on the front porch or patio. It is such a pleasant boost to your day.

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