Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

May 2009 - In My Garden

by Betty Coffelt, UC Master Gardener

As May begins my Cherokee Chief dogwood and Oklahoma redbud have finished blooming and are leafing out. The citrus trees are in bloom drop and have just about finished shedding their old leaves. May is a very busy time in the garden.

Roses: If you have blooming roses its time to cut back spent roses. This is called deadheading. You can help your roses greatly by the way you cut them back. If you are just removing dead flowers cut back to the first outward facing group of 5 leaves. Cut at an angle within $\frac{1}{4}$" of the leaves (downward facing to the inside of the plant). If you are picking roses for a bouquet cut only as much stem as you need. The shorter the stem the sooner your rose will bloom again. If you find a rose stem that is growing to the inside of the bush cut it out at the base of the cane. This will help keep the air circulation through the bush.

If you like yellow roses St. Patrick was developed for our hot summer climates. The color holds true and it will stay on the bush for a long time. In spring the colors of most roses are strong, but some colors tend to fade on later bloom in our hot sun. If you have some of those types, you can feed them a handful of Epsom salt (which contains magnesium and calcium) when the second buds appear. Just sprinkle it on the ground out to the drip line. When you water it will soak in.

Peonies: As May starts it is also time for me to deadhead my early peony bushes. I only cut back to the first leaves on the stems, so that the bush stays green and grows for next year. The older a peony bush, the prettier it is. My oldest one is from my Mom. It is in full bloom now and is about 4' tall and 30" in diameter. I like to dry these flowers for arrangements. Flowers need to be cut when they first start to show color. I cut about l8" of stem and remove all the leaves. Then hang them upside down in a cool place to dry. They hold their color well and are very pretty in the winter or in dry arrangements. I have 9 different kinds of peonies that bloom early, mid and late season.

Chrysanthemums: Most of my chrysanthemums bloom in the fall and I am in the process of cutting them back to about 8-inches of foliage for the second time. I also have 3 "mums" that bloom both spring and fall, so I don't cut them back until they have finished blooming. The earliest one will be done in about two weeks; the other two won't be done for about 6 weeks.

If you want to generate or propagate more plants, this is a great time to take cuttings from your trimmings. You need about 4" of the tip of the stem. Remove the leaves from the base of the cutting leaving about $1\frac{1}{2}$" of leaves at the top. You can use a rooting hormone or just plant the cuttings in potting soil about 2 inches deep and water well. Place the potted plants in the shade for a few weeks. They root very easily.

Daffodils: Next I rake up and remove the yellowing and dead foliage of my early and mid blooming daffodils (late blooming bulbs are not ready to clean up yet). This makes room for the perennials that are growing now. My bells of Ireland are about 30" tall and ready to use in bouquets. They have come back for several years and I am very happy with how well they do. Lilies are anywhere from 8 - 30 inches tall. Some have flower buds that are swelling and about to bloom.

Veggies and Fruits: I've got my veggie garden all planted except squash, which I'll seed any day now. I have 42 tomato plants of 11 different types; 22 pepper plants of 4 different kinds; and on a tripod arbor I have 5 types of cucumbers and some asparagus beans. My potatoes are almost ready to bloom so we will have them soon. This month I will stake my tomatoes and cucumbers. We use 4 each 2 x 2 inch by 8 foot stakes for each row. I string twine between the uprights starting 6" off the ground. Some indeterminate type of tomatoes will grow over 7' tall.

The grapes and berries are growing strong on the arbor. I have thinned the grape spurs to every 8 inches to allow filtered light in. Later this month I will thin the grapes. I cluster thin by cutting the cluster just below the shoulder of each bunch. The shoulder is the wide area at the top of each cluster. I find it difficult to thin fruit, but I do because it is beneficial to the plant and the fruit that remains is larger and sweeter. The berries are setting fruit and still blooming. The nectar berry is usually ready to pick in early June but things seem to be early this year, so we will see.

Fruit trees also need to be thinned. On my peaches and nectarine I leave about 6 inches between fruits. My first peach is a donut peach and it sets a lot of fruit, so it has to be thinned severely. If you have some doubles, then give your trees a little more water this summer. Remove the doubles while you are thinning. If you have apples now is a good time to thin them. You can leave the largest apple in each cluster. Our cherry tree is showing color but it will be awhile before it is ready to harvest.

Gift Plants Keep on Giving: Did you receive a gift plant for Easter? If so many of them will transplant outside very well. I received an Easter lily. I have cut back the flowers and will carefully remove it from its pot and just plant it into a flower bed, where it can receive at least 6 hours of sunlight a day. The bulb will be fed through photosynthesis and it will return next year. I have an Easter lily that my son gave me in l990. It should bloom in about 6 weeks. Miniature roses will also do great outside; just realize that there are usually 4-6 plants in each pot. To separate them soak them in a container filled with water and gently move them up and down in the water. This will help separate the roots. Plant them in as much sun as you have. Plan them at the depth they were planted in the pot. They will be blooming again this summer.

So enjoy the spring weather and get out, get grubby, and get planting.

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