



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

March Garden Tips 2019 (March 9, 2019)

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March is unpredictable in California, and especially so in our valley, foothill and mountain areas. It can be sunny one day, rainy the next. We can have very warm days followed by a night of hard frost. We sometimes think spring starts in February, but March is the month of the equinox and was the first month of the year in the Roman calendar. It's a month of flowers and abundant foliage growth, in both our desirable garden treasures and, unfortunately, in weeds as well. There are flowers in the garden and flowers in the fields and flowers on the hills. Everywhere is rebirth and vigor and the desire to get out in the garden.

PLANTING: Although we do most of our planting in autumn, spring is the second season of major planting. You can plant all varieties of trees, shrubs, perennials, ground covers and vines in the spring. Go ahead and experiment: add some diversity and spring color to your garden. And it's time to plant heat-loving edibles like cucumber, tomato, melon, beans, eggplant and squash, especially towards the end of the month when the weather and soil are warmer. You can also plant potato, radish, chives, greens, beets, and herbs of all types.



Citrus, avocado and other frost-sensitives should be planted later in the month. When buying citrus, please be sure to buy from a reputable Tulare or Kings county nursery so we don't spread the Asian citrus psyllid. That means saying "no" to the neighbor or family member who has an extra citrus tree for you, and that means not bringing citrus trees into the county from elsewhere in the state.

We think of March as a big color month. Lots of plants, native and non, bloom profusely in March. If you need quick color, plant ageratum, alyssum, bachelor buttons, begonias, celosia, cleome, coleus, cosmos, dusty miller, gomphrena, impatiens, lobelia, marigolds, nasturtiums, nicotiana, petunias, portulacas, salvias and verbena. It is also the month to start planting summer blooming bulbs such as cannas, calla lily, crocosmia, dahlia, gladiolus, liatris, lilies, ranunculus, tuberose and zephyranthes. Buy caladiums now but wait to plant until the soil is warmer; otherwise, they will rot.

MAINTAINING: Your pruning should be finished for the year, unless there is a safety issue. In spring, our attention turns to insect and pest issues. Hand picking large insects is easier on the garden and the ecology, if you can stand it. Using traps like rolled up newspaper or boards is another way to catch and remove insect pests like snails, slugs and earwigs.



If you must use chemicals for slugs and snails, use baits containing iron phosphate, which is not toxic to children, wildlife or pets. Baits containing metaldehyde are extremely toxic. Tolerate some damage, especially from caterpillars. Think of them as the pretty butterflies and moths they will become. They are also a major food source for nesting and hatching birds now.

Start setting baits out now for Argentine and other non-native ants and rotate the chemical every three months. Eliminating ants will help natural controls for a whole host of soft-bodied insects.

Spittle bugs are occasionally an unsightly nuisance but do little damage. They seem to prefer rosemary and many sage varieties. The foam protects babies from birds, but populations rarely grow large and the "spittle" doesn't stay long.

If rain is not plentiful, water your new transplants well and keep them from completely drying out. This attention to irrigation is one reason planting in the spring is more difficult than in the fall, although some springs are wetter than the previous fall, and maybe that will happen this season. If you haven't already done so, check your drip and sprinkler systems, cleaning filters, checking for leaks and making needed improvements. Get ready for summer before you need the irrigation system.

March is also a good month to fertilize roses. Use a specialty plant food and add a handful of Epsom salt on each plant along with the fertilizer before watering in thoroughly. You can also fertilize non-native perennials that are emerging from dormancy and established citrus trees. Your California native plants don't need fertilizer, although you could give your acid-loving manzanita a weak dose of fertilizer labeled for camellias, azaleas and magnolias.

Weed control is in high gear. Cool season grasses have seeds; warm season weeds are blooming. Whether you use mechanical or chemical or a mix, just remember weeds are trying to protect the earth's crust by reducing erosion. If you clear an area of weeds, what will replace these plants? Bare dirt is only natural in small bits. Use rock or bark or living mulch (a.k.a plants!) to keep your soil on your property.

CONSERVING: While purchasing your spring plants, include at least one plant that increases the diversity and usefulness for pollinators and/or other wildlife. Matching a plant with your soil and climate (including water availability) ensures fewer pests and less maintenance. Any variety of sage is a good and reliable pollinator plant, but there are lots of others. Buckwheat, for instance, or yarrow, and of course milkweed (native varieties only!) for the Monarchs. The most common milkweed in California is "narrow leaf," and it is also easy to grow. Think of it as a cottage garden plant. Milkweed is a colony plant and does best without a lot of fuss and disturbance. It's also good to note that milkweed is winter dormant and turns brown or even disappears (especially when small) every winter, only to emerge again when the soil is quite warm. Sometimes putting a garden art (gnome, perhaps?) near the milkweed allows us to remember where it is and avoid putting another plant in its spot or otherwise disturb those slumbering roots.

Take some time to consider the food chain of your garden. There is a whole world on our planet that is not human. Although we are the most important species to ourselves, are we the most important to microbes and spittle bugs? A lot of what alarms us is not really that harmful to our healthy plants. Do the least toxic first and try to live in some balance. It's a lot easier, and we should try to make our gardens a place of serenity and healing and energy and harmony. In other words, even in the modern, formal or highly-managed garden, a natural place, full of health and life. Happy Springtime!

The UCCE Master Gardeners will be available to answer your gardening questions at the following venues in:

Visalia Senior Center Garden, every Friday from 11-12. 310 N. Locust Street.

Visalia's Farmer's Market in Sears Parking lot, you can find us each Saturday 9-12pm.

For answers to all your home gardening questions, call the Master Gardeners in Tulare County at (559) 684-3325. Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9:30 and 11:30am; or in Kings County at (559) 852-2736, Thursdays only, 9:30-11:30am; or visit our website to search past articles, find links to UC gardening information, or to email us with your questions:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/

We love to talk plants. Come ask us your gardening questions!