



# NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

## March Garden Tips 2020 (3/7/2020)

by Peyton Ellas, UCCE Master Gardener

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, especially in the past few years. But March is the month of the equinox and it was actually the first month of the year in the Roman calendar. It's a month of flowers and abundant foliage growth, in plants we consider weeds, but also in our desirable garden treasures. If you planted a new landscape last autumn, March may be the first sign of new above-ground growth in your California and other western plants.



**PLANTING:** Although in our area we do the majority of our planting in autumn, spring is the second season of major planting. You can plant all varieties of trees, shrubs, perennials, ground covers, or 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 it means not bringing citrus trees into the county from elsewhere. There are quarantines in place and many regulations about movement of bulk quantities of citrus fruit in order to save the California citrus industry, much of which is in our counties. Help out as a homeowner by following good citrus practices. You can find out more from the CDFA website or read the University of California Pest Note at:

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74155.html>



Asian Citrus Psyllid

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, duster 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 zephranthes. 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 cardboard, 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 and don't stay long. They look like little blobs of wet foam with a small bug in the middle. 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.

March is also a good month to fertilize roses. Use a specialty plant food and add a handful of Epson 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 camelias, 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. Add an easy to grow colorful California native like Cleveland Sage or California Fuschia. Matching a plant with your soil and climate (including water availability) ensures fewer pests and less maintenance. If you want to try milkweed for the Monarch butterflies, search out the native varieties. 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.



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. Make sure your system is as efficient as possible. You may consider upgrading to a "smart" controller that can better adjust to the weather and water needs of the garden. I've tried several of them now, and most of them are reliable, affordable and easy to use with a smart phone app. You still should check your system periodically to make sure there are no leaks or other problems.

Happy Springtime!

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

Visalia Farmers' Market – Every Saturday morning (8-11 am), Sears parking lot, Mooney Blvd.

March 14, 10:00 - 3:00, STEAM Expo, TCOE Planetarium & Science Center

March 28, Sequoia Garden Club Tour

April 4, 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM, Tulare Garden Festival, Tulare Public Library, 475 North "M" Street, Tulare, CA.

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 11:30 am; or Kings County at (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m; 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/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/)

Visit us on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/mgtularekings14/>