

Bothell Reporter



Spring fever

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COVER STORY

It can be easy, being green



Newly bloomed crocuses signal the coming of spring.

Spring is here, and now is the time to get out in the garden

By Annika
Wallendahl



Photos by
Meghan E. Jones

April showers bring May flowers. But that's only true if you get out and start digging. With summer around the corner, here's a quick guide for what you should be doing right now to get your garden into splendid shape.

A nutritious foundation

With gardening, the outcome of the final product is limited by the quality of the ingredients. If your aim is to grow spectacular fruits, vegetables or flowers, you may need to amend the soil in your yard.

If your soil contains too much clay, it will be hard and tough for roots to penetrate. If your soil contains too much sand, it will drain too fast and not give your plants

enough time to absorb water and nutrients.

How do you make sure you have "Grade A" dirt?

"A good soil is loose, sandy, holds moisture and is nutritious," said Phyllis Hopkins, manager at Hopkins Nursery in Bothell.

Soil should be friable or crumble between your fingers, added Hopkins. If your soil is lackluster, the best way to improve it is to add organic matter.

Improving your soil

"I always encourage people to add organic matter to soils," said Joel Reich, horticulture instructor at Cascadia Community College in Bothell.

Organic matter is the decaying plant and

animal material found in soil. Compost, peat and manure are three kinds of organic matter that people often add to their gardens. If you add organic matter now, you'll see the benefits through the rest of the growing season.

Organic matter contains beneficial nutrients and microbes that aid in plant growth. Adding organic matter also increases the water-holding capacity of the soil, which means you water less frequently and plants have more time to absorb nutrients through their roots, said Reich.

How much organic matter should you add?

"The sky's the limit. It's one of the few things in life where you can't overdo it," Reich said.

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As a rule of thumb, Reich suggests adding three to five inches, then tilling or turning the soil. You can repeat this process each year. It is also beneficial to add organic matter to the root area when planting trees and shrubs.

Winning the war on weeds

The best way to win the war on weeds is to use mulch to suppress weed growth by keeping out sunlight.

"This is a very good time to bark or mulch to keep weeds down for the summer," said Hopkins.

"Mulch technically is anything that you put on top of the ground. Here, mulch is bark. In California, it's rock, and in Georgia, it's peanut shells," she added.

Other material commonly used as mulch are lawn clippings, compost, black plastic, gravel, cardboard and plastic pellets. For annual weed control, a five-inch layer is the most effective, but you can probably get by with three or four inches, Hopkins added.

Some perennial weeds — like blackberries — take a much more dedicated effort to remove.

Some convenient watering tips

Does anyone actually enjoy watering 20 different spots in their garden in the middle of summer? You can spend less time with the garden hose and less money on your water bill by incorporating these four watering tips in your garden.

(1) Choose native plants that enjoy our wet winters but are also drought-tolerant in the summer.

(2) If you want to include thirstier plants in your garden, group them together. Then you won't have to drag the garden hose across the yard to 10 different places.

(3) Install a drip irrigation system. This gets water straight to the roots where plants actually want it.

"Always water the roots and not the leaves," said Joel Reich, horticulture instructor at Cascadia Community College. "Droplets form a film of water (on leaves) that provides a good site for plant pathogens — like fungi — to get a foothold."

(4) Add organic matter. The small bits of plant and animal material in organic matter act like "little pieces of sponge" that help retain water in the soil around a plant's roots, Reich said.

Because perennials store energy in their root systems, they are capable of returning year after year even without getting extra energy from the sun.

"There's never a quick way to get rid of blackberries," said Reich.

The most effective way to get rid of blackberries is to mow or hack down the canes, then cover the area with cardboard, wooden boards or black plastic. Do this for two to three years and you'll eventually starve out their root systems, Reich said.

Fertilizing your lawn

Most chemical fertilizers contain three components: nitrogen, phosphorus and potas-

sium. The ratio of these components is usually written on the container label. Nitrogen increases green growth; phosphorus promotes root growth as well as fruits and blooms; and potassium promotes disease resistance and overall vitality.

There are many types of chemical fertilizers on the market, but Reich and Hopkins are both proponents of using compost as your primary garden fertilizer.

"Compost is fabulous for lawns. Mow your lawn then use a push-along spreader to add a half-inch of compost — you can also spread it by hand — then water it in. For five days to a week you'll see some brown,

but then the grass will grow and obscure it," Reich said.

You can add compost to your lawn through the month of May.

Taming the jungle

If you have quick-growing shrubs in a small garden space, it's time to start sharpening those pruning shears. However, the best way to curb unruly growth is not by pruning, but by planting dwarf varieties of your favorite plants.

Jerry Munro, owner of Munro's Nursery in Kenmore, recommends spending a few extra dollars and investing in dwarf-plant varieties to save time and money down the road. Dwarf varieties may cost a few dollars more than their full-sized siblings, but the long-term savings more than makes up for it.

After adding up the labor hours and the cost of disposing of clippings, the dwarf variety will easily pay for itself, Munro said.

In fact, yard waste takes up an enormous amount of space in landfills. What better way to save money — and landfill space — than to not generate the clippings to begin with?

Native versus non-native plants

When choosing new additions for your garden this year,

consider selecting native plants.

Many non-native plants thrive in Western Washington's climate. In the past, consumers have favored non-native plant varieties because they grow so much faster than native varieties. However, the adaptability and aggressiveness of a few non-native plants has led to many problems — especially in wetlands — where native species have been completely overtaken. These aggressive non-native plants are called invasive plants.

Many invasive plants spread from suburban gardens. One such invasive plant, English ivy, has spread extensively throughout the Pacific Northwest. This hardy vine is very aggressive and capable of killing a 40-foot tree, Munro said.

English ivy has taken over many areas, resulting in "ivy deserts," places where other vegetation can no longer compete successfully. Even worse, in urban areas, English ivy provides habitat for rats.

"English ivy — don't do it," said Kim Bean, manager of Munro's Nursery.

There are no regulations that bar nurseries from carrying invasive plants — though more and more nurseries are opting not to.

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“There’s no protocol. It’s up to you to be ethical as the consumer,” said Bean.

One way to keep invasive species out of protected areas is to read up on the problem plants. A list of both native and invasive plants in the “Garden Wise” booklet is available for downloading at the Washington Invasive Species Coalition Web site, www.invasivespeciescoalition.org/gardenplants.

There are hundreds of native plants that can add shade, greenery, flowers, color and excitement to your garden.

“For every invasive plant, there are several (native) alternatives that look similar,” said Bean.

A gardener’s new best friend: the Internet

The Internet is a tremendous resource for gardeners. As you’re choosing annuals and perennials throughout the year, use your computer to do research. With a few clicks, you can find pictures and information about thousands of plant varieties.

Bean recommends doing an Internet search by plant name to look at photos and learn which variety will grow best with the soil and light conditions you



Fall is the time to plant flowers, like tulips, in your garden to enjoy in the spring.

have in your garden.

One Web site that’s a great matchmaker between Pacific Northwest plants and gardeners is Great Plant Picks, www.great-plantpicks.org. The site allows you to search for plants that are suited to our climate zone and easy to cultivate. You can search for plants by using the common name, scientific name, plant type (vine, tree, shrub, perennial, annual), soil type, light conditions and even color.

Other excellent Internet resources include the Washington Native Plant Society’s Web site,

www.wnps.org, and Washington State University’s “Gardening in Western Washington” Web site, <http://gardening.wsu.edu>.

Get your seeds out

If you’re planning on growing some prize-winning pumpkins or radiant radishes, now’s the time to start planting. In fact, if you hop to it, you may even be able to get in a second crop of vegetables before the fall.

May is the ideal time to start vegetables like pumpkins, lettuce, watermelon, spinach,

Five steps to good dirt

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there are five ways to improve soil quality.

- Add some organic matter. Adding organic matter combats erosion and helps retain water and nutrients in the soil.
- Don’t overtill. Excessive tilling can cause soil compaction and decrease the nutrients and beneficial microbes found in soil.
- Be careful with fertilizers. Adding too many nutrients — even from compost — can negatively impact soils.
- Cover the ground. Mulch can be used to save bare soil from wind erosion or from becoming dried out.
- Diversify your plants. Different plants have different root systems, which benefit your soil in different ways. A variety of plants encourages a range of microorganisms, insects and animals to live in your garden.

You can read more about healthy soils at the USDA Web site, www.soils.usda.gov/sqi/concepts.

radishes, cucumbers and carrots. Make sure you keep the soil moist, but avoid allowing it to become waterlogged or the seeds may rot.

In order to succeed, many seeds need the sustained warmer soil temperatures of middle and late spring. If you want to know precisely when to plant, you can

purchase a soil thermometer from your local nursery to keep in your garden patch. Most of the previously mentioned vegetables need soil temperatures of 50 to 60 degrees or higher to thrive.

Depending on the seed variety and the cooperation of Mother Nature, vegetables will be ready for harvest in 30 to 110 days. For example, according to some packages, radishes will mature in about 30 days; spinach in 45 days; cucumbers in 60 days; eggplants, carrots and onions in 70 days; watermelons and lettuce in 80 days; and pumpkins in 110 days.

Always read and follow the instructions on the back of the seed package. These are your blueprints to success.

If you’re planting annual flowers like zinnias, nasturtium, sweet pea, stock, primrose and alyssum, now is also a good time to sow those.

If you feel overwhelmed or are looking for inspiration, visit one of your local nurseries. Nursery managers have a wealth of knowledge and can help you choose plants that fit your needs and garden conditions. Many nurseries also sell compost and other organic matter.

Annika Wallendahl is a contributing writer.

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