

A word from the plant.....

As spring begins to show the first signs of waking from it's winter slumber it is time to start not just thinking but doing in the garden.

In the metropolis that is Winterbourne Bassett weekends echo to the sound of spades and trowels being bought out of hibernation. In the village I have the dubious title of `Phill the plant` this doesn't mean that I am a snitch for the local constabulary, merely that I am fortunate enough to work as a gardener & sometime designer. I can be found propping up the bar at various local hostleries dispensing pearls of horticultural wisdom for the price of half a shandy for those who have nothing better to do with their time other than to listen to me witter, for wittering I am told by some is one of the things I do best.

On a more serious note, for gardening is at times extremely serious what follows are a few seasonal tips to help you along the way.

Frosts can still be a hazard, so keep vulnerable plants protected at night if frost is forecast. March winds are also notorious for their ferocity so check exposed plants are well supported.

Now is the time for a thorough spring clean; weed and dig over your borders incorporating as much organic matter as you can - those chilly winds will really help to dry out the soil. Mulch bare soil once you have done the work and remove moss and weeds from paths, terraces and driveways. They may be boring tasks but if you don't get on top of the garden now (especially the weeds!) it will be a nightmare for the rest of the season.

Make new beds and borders - mark the shape with sand trickled from a bottle or a length of hosepipe, remove the top layer of growing vegetation and dig the ground over, incorporating as much organic matter as possible. If you are making a bed in the lawn, remove the turf - if you dig it in the buried grass will regrow and regrow and regrow and...

Clean and repair your garden tools, book the lawn mower in for a service and check garden furniture for any rot. When it is warm enough, treat sheds, fences and trellis with wood preservative; brushes and rollers are fine for most things, however a sprayer is well worth buying for tricky projects such as woven panels!

TREES, SHRUBS, CLIMBERS

Plant container-grown roses, shrubs and climbers (remember to plant climbers about 10" away from walls so they are not in a rain shadow) and give overgrown climbers a tidying haircut. Remember, this is absolutely the last chance for planting bare-rooted roses - when the buds have broken it is too late.

Prune modern bush and shrub roses, colourfully stemmed dogwoods and willows and Buddleja and ornamental elders.

Move evergreen shrubs.

LAWNS

If it is very wet keep off the lawn as much as possible - damage to waterlogged lawns is easily inflicted and irritatingly hard to rectify. When the weather improves and the lawn has had a chance to dry out, give it a first cut with the blades on the highest setting - don't be tempted if conditions are wet! Reseed bare patches, neaten the edges with a half moon cutter or spade and remove molehills and wormcasts. If you are planning a new lawn, start preparing the ground for seeding or laying turf. Ask for advice in your local garden centre if you are unsure as to how to begin.

BULBS, FLOWERS AND CONTAINERS

Protect new spring shoots from slugs...

Plant summer flowering bulbs and snowdrops and winter aconites 'in the green' - ie when the plant has finished flowering but the foliage is still present and green. Neither takes kindly to being planted as dry bulbs. Add some compost to the soil, a sprinkling of bonemeal and plant them slightly deeper than they were in the pot.

Lift and divide overgrown clumps of perennials and split polyanthus plants once they have finished flowering.

Sow hardy annuals in drifts - clashing colours just don't matter in a garden, but remember to plant taller plants behind shorter ones.

Sow sweet peas outdoors (soak the seeds overnight to improve germination) and plant out those raised under cover.

Brighten up your pots and containers with tete-a-tete, pansies, violas, primroses, cyclamen and spring heathers. A stunning combination is tete-a-tete surrounded by pink and yellow primroses and variegated ivy - or try pansies densely packed for a striking display of colour. Plant flowering spring bulbs and primroses in empty gaps... a bit of a cheat, but who cares!

Remove the top layer of soil from pot-grown shrubs and replace with fresh potting compost that contains a slow-release fertiliser.

If the weather really does turn dry, remember pots and containers will need watering, especially if they are near a wall and in a sheltered position. Take care not to overwater.

KITCHEN GARDEN

FRUIT TREES AND BUSHES

If you haven't done so already, prune standard or bush apple and pear trees before the buds break; keep the centre of the tree or shrub fairly open to allow air to circulate freely. Cut out crossing and rubbing branches to avoid open wounds which encourage disease. Do not prune espalier/cordon trained apples and pears.

Plant pot-grown fruit trees, strawberry plants and rhubarb crowns.

Protect fruit trees and gooseberries with netting; birds love developing fruit buds and your entire crop can disappear with astonishing speed unless protected!

Check all ties and stakes to ensure they are not broken or too tight.

Check stored fruit and throw out any showing signs of disease.

Add organic fertiliser to your fruit trees and shrubs; remove any mulch, feed around the roots, water and renew the mulch. Use organic rather than inorganic or chemical fertilisers to provide a slow release of nutrients; a sudden burst of growth too early in the season puts the plant at risk from disease and pests.

Force rhubarb; clear away all dead foliage and cover the crown with a forcer if you have one or a large pot if you don't. To encourage faster growth, cover the forcer with horse manure; the heat will produce even more dramatic results as it rots down!

VEGETABLES

Many vegetable crops can be sown this month - wait until the weather turns warmer, check the instructions on the seed packets and plant away! Broad beans, carrots, lettuces, spinach, salad leaves, leeks and chard are just a few ideas to get your healthy, cheap and home-grown food underway!

Plant Jerusalem artichoke tubers - bury them 1" deep and 12-18" apart - but remember they spread like wildfire unless you dig up every last one at harvest time.

Plant shallots, garlic and onion sets as well as asparagus crowns in friable well-drained soil.

Harvest the last leeks, Brussels sprouts, sprouting broccoli and cabbages.

Plant out your early potatoes at the end of the month - or if you haven't already done so already, start chitting your seed potatoes - put them in a light, cool place with the end showing the most 'buds' uppermost - an old egg box is ideal.

If you have a frost-free greenhouse, get ahead with the summer crops - sweet peppers, tomatoes, aubergines and salads can be planted inside. (If it remains cold, check the temperature requirements on the seed packet and wait if necessary.)