

## COUNT DOWN TO SUMMER by Kelly Noel

Like all gardeners, I am getting impatient for spring to arrive! I do love fresh and crisp winter days and enjoy having time off from my garden, but I'm ready now for spring! These last few weeks I have been spending more and more time perusing garden magazines, old and new, going over notes and photos of last summer's garden and making a wish list. I am getting ready for the coming season.

My garden journal tells me that on St Patrick's day in 1996, a good two weeks earlier than usually possible, I spent a couple of very pleasant hours cleaning up winter debris from the beds in front of my south-facing house. In 2004, we had 10 cm of new snow on April 4, just when the first crocuses started to bloom. And in 2002, the temperature was 30EC on April 15 but cold and snowy again on April 27. We never know when warm temperatures will be here for good. But the shoots of spring bulb will soon poke through the ground and the trees will bud out, and we will all feel invigorated and refreshed. People who live where there are only minor differences from season to season cannot possibly appreciate this greening up the way we do - spending, as we do, five months with ice and snow.

### **Pamper your tools**

In late November a couple of almost balmy days pulled me outside to clean up my tool cupboard. I resolved at that time that I would start next season with clean and sharpened tools. I washed the dirt off all the digging tools - spades, fork, edger, cultivators - and dried them carefully. I used sandpaper to buff rough spots off unfinished wooden handles and then rubbed the wood with a rag soaked in boiled linseed oil.

I washed and dried the cutting tools - secateurs, loppers and shears - and brought them inside because they have to be sharpened too. They are all still in a bag waiting for me to get to that job - I am trying to enlist my husband to help me! We will need rags, paint thinner, 000 steel wool and a stiff brush to give them a thorough cleaning; a sharpening stone to restore the cutting edge; and 3-in-1 oil to lubricate the hinges. If we do this right, I should be able to cut paper with them!

### **Keeping track**

I am a "record keeper". Always with me when I am out in the garden is a clipboard holding to-do lists, maps of the garden beds and a printout of my plant database. Every now and then, I sit down - as much for a rest as to make some notes. When I add or remove plants, I amend the appropriate map. These are simple maps - each perennial is represented by a circle with the name of the plant inside. When I add a new plant, I pencil in its details on my database listing, including name, colour, height, date planted, etc.. When I spot a job that needs doing, I add it to my TO DO list with a note about when it should be done. And I confess I sometimes add a job already done just for the satisfaction of crossing it off!

After each session working in the garden, I take out the multi-year garden journal I mentioned above and note what is sprouting, what's in bloom, what jobs I did, any problems I have spotted and what I did to deal with them. Looking over these entries shows me what was going on at the same time in other years and helps me decide what jobs should be done next.

Record-keeping is not everyone's cup of tea and doesn't make a garden more beautiful, but it suits me to do it. If you don't always remember the names of your plants and wish that you did, consider coming up with a system that will work for you. A few pictures, some simple maps and a to-do list will help you keep organized.

Just last week I turned all my handwritten notes into computer entries and printed a new version of the database, and I redrew a few of the maps that were getting hard to read. So now my clipboard is ready to go for another season.

### **Starting seeds**

Last fall I collected seed from some annuals, a few perennials and some particularly delicious cherry tomatoes. The only place where I can put trays of seedlings is a north-facing, which does not get nearly enough light for success at this kind of operation. So I have a growing bench with fluorescent light on timers. I set this up at the end of February and planted some petunias, marigolds, coreopsis and the tomatoes. I check these everyday and am excited to see each new sprout. I'll start hardening these off at the end of May and will plant them out around the beginning of June.

### **Wish list**

What's on the wish list I am making? I want more fragrance in my garden this summer. I will be looking for more plants with interesting foliage: perhaps variegated, or silver or maroon. The star of my front garden last summer was a spectacular pink hybrid hibiscus (*H. moscheutos*) and I definitely want at least one more of those - hopefully a white one.

So I'm ready now. Come on spring!!