

Waiting for Gardening by Mary Shearman Reid

After the thrill of looking at all of the gardening catalogues, ordering some seeds and plants, planning our garden changes – perhaps taking a trip to somewhere warmer (and admiring the gardens there) — we gardeners are anxious to get out into our gardens as soon as there is the slightest indication that snow is melting and birds are returning from their winter holidays. There is so much to do – in addition to just getting outside to enjoy the fresh air. Here are a few thoughts as you wait for the magic of spring to be here.

Try not to roll your lawn in the early spring or walk on it when it's soggy. Some turf experts no longer recommend rolling your lawn at all because it actually compacts the soil that has been naturally aerated by the winter's frost. Good aeration is the first step in promoting a deeper root system, which is the primary defense against summer droughts. Wait until your lawn has dried out before you loosen the thatch and remove any debris. If you leave a footprint or you hear squelching, it is too early – give your lawn a bit more drying out time – and you can use the same guidelines for your gardens.

You can certainly fertilize your lawn in the early spring – once again, once it is 'dry' enough for you to walk on. Pick a good-quality, slow-release fertilizer so that your lawn can enjoy its meal for a prolonged period. Water soluble fertilizers do work fine; however, if we get lots of rain, the fertilizer can be washed away early on. The spring fertilizer you choose should have a high first number – nitrogen. This will help develop good blade growth which will help in giving your lawn the nutrients it needs before facing the heat and drought of the summer.

As soon as the garden is dry enough for you to walk through it, you can pick up all the debris that has lodged itself in your gardens – sticks, litter and so on. Remove any dead growth from perennials. By doing a bit of early tidying up, you will discourage insects from finding potential homes.

If your garden planning included dividing and transplanting perennials, embark on this task once the ground is warm and workable (not cold and clammy!). To limit the stress to your plants, a good rule of thumb is to transplant and move later-blooming plants in the spring, and transplant and move early-blooming plants in the fall. Blossoms will be less compromised, too. (As always, there are exceptions – the most notable being peonies, poppies and bearded iris – August is a better time to move or divide these plants.)

If you can't wait to plant your begonias, dahlias and other summer bulbs until after fear of frost, usually the long weekend in May, why not start them inside your home sometime in March. This will ensure they bloom earlier. Recycled pots (give them a quick wash with a drop or 2 of bleach, first) and potting soil are really all you need for this task – except of course garden labels and a marker. If you really want to make your life easy, you can put your bulbs in peat or paper pots so that come planting weekend, you don't even have to take the plants out of their pots – they can go straight into your planters or garden.

If you are running out of room to plant these summer bulbs, keep an eye open for weak clusters of spring flowering bulbs – perhaps a daffodil or tulip grouping need a bit of plumping up. Pop your summer bulb plants in the ground near to those weaker bulb groups – so when you take out the summer bulbs to store them for the winter, you'll be reminded that new fall bulbs should go in that area of your garden.

Speaking of augmenting your spring flowering bulbs, why not keep any pots of forced flowers and plant them in your garden. There are a number of organizations that sell crocus, Easter lilies, etc. as fundraisers – usually in the dead of winter when we are all looking for a spot of colour in our homes. Rather than adding these spent plants to your compost heap, treat them as if they were growing in your garden. Deadhead and continue to water them. As they begin to die down, take the pots out of their place of honour in your house and put them in the basement or an unused bedroom. As long as the temperature is no lower than a regular outdoors March day, your plants will be fine! Once the soil in your garden is warm and workable, remove the bulbs and soil from their pot and plant them in your garden. With a little bit of sun shining on the leaves as they die down and a little bit of granular fertilizer for flowering plants or bulb booster, these bulbs should bloom for you in your garden next spring. (Remember the bulbs have to be hardy for our climate – unfortunately the popular Christmas paper whites are not.)

With all of these ideas on your To Do list, you can while away some time as you wait patiently for longer, warmer days – and no doubt, even a little more fun in your garden. Happy Gardening!