

In The Garden: Five Important Things To Do This Spring *by Barbara Bravo*

Once a hint of spring arrives on the first warm breeze, I can't wait to start preparing for the gardening season ahead. While images of lush, flowering landscapes dance in my head replacing the recent sugar fairies of the winter holidays, the truth of winter's presence is all too real when I step outside. While I've been sitting by the toasty woodstove, leafing through gardening magazines and seed catalogs, branches have been breaking, falling to the ground and, oh yes, there are all those leaves that never got collected and put into the compost bin. It's definitely time to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

Clean-up

Before any of the fun stuff can begin, I focus on cleaning-up all the winter mess. Year, after year, despite my pledge to be diligent and rake the leaves off the lawn, Mother Nature drops cold, wet weather on our heads before I've had a chance to get the job done. An easy solution for dealing with those leaves that were left behind is to mow them up. I like to wait for a sunny day when they have dried a bit. Then I get two jobs done at once. The leaves get collected and chopped by the mower blades. They'll break down nicely in the compost bin and provide nutrients and organic matter when I spread the resulting compost on the flowerbeds. If there are not too many leaves on the grass, mow them and just rake them around. They'll feed the lawn when they decompose.

Remove damaged branches

Now is a good time to walk around your yard looking for damaged shrubs or broken branches and limbs. Using clean sharp pruning shears or a handsaw, trim back the damaged parts to good wood. Just be sure to make your cuts clean and smooth and they should heal nicely. If large trees have suffered storm damage, it's best to call in a professional who will correct the problem for you.

Peel back winter mulch

After you've dealt with the lawn and winter damage you can begin to remove any winter mulch you may have put down to protect your flowerbeds and shrubs. You can do this little by little using your judgment with regard to weather. Hudson Valley springs can be deceiving. Who hasn't been tricked with warm glorious spring days only to be followed by cold rain, sleet or snow! Early spring is a great time to apply an inch of compost around your plants. No need to scratch it in, microorganisms and worms will do the job for you. And by feeding the earth, the earth will feed the plants and your garden will flourish

Grow something

March is an excellent time to start seeds indoors. My favorite time to do this is 6 to 8 weeks before the last expected frost date. In the Hudson Valley that is around April 30. You can start tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and other heat loving veggies indoors. But, don't put them out in the garden until at the earliest mid-May. If we have a cold snap they'll just sit there and sulk or worse. In April you can plant lettuce, spinach, pea and beet seeds directly into the garden. They do best in cool weather. Contact Cornell Cooperative Extension for information about the best varieties to grow. It's a fabulous resource that can provide you with all the information you'll need for a bountiful vegetable garden.

Protect your plants

And finally, we really need to address "deer munching". Part of the reason for choosing to live in the Hudson Valley is to be close to nature and to enjoy the rich variety of flora and fauna. Sometimes it can be challenging to live side by side with our local wildlife especially the white tailed deer. Along with the appearance of lush spring growth the deer will be coming too. They will be hungry and looking for delectable greens to eat. The young new shoots of spring are a real favorite of deer. Fences are by far the best deterrent but if you can't fence in your gardens, there are many sprays available that work well and even some home brew recipes that work reasonably well. Sprays work two ways: some deter by odor and some by taste. The secret is to spray and spray often as the plants grow to discourage munching. Tulips are a favorite food, so be sure to protect them. Tulips sitting in your favorite vase will be a lovely reward for all your hard work. The deer can find something else to eat.

Spring is the time of renewal. These simple steps will get the garden off to a good start and prepare the scene for the arrival of richly colored spring bulbs, flowering shrubs and the re-emergence of favorite perennials. I can hardly wait.

Barbara Bravo is a Garden Coach, Master Gardener and Ceramic Artist. She has 24 years experience gardening in Ulster County where the wildlife is plentiful and where she continues to learn peaceful co-existence.

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