

Key to successful gardening in northern Michigan is having patience... and a Plan B

Gardening in northern Michigan has its challenges. We deal with extremes in weather all year long, but more than any, spring is both the most frustrating and rewarding of seasons.

If you are like me, you find yourself longing for spring to begin on its actual calendar date. Let March come in like a lion as long as it really does go out like a lamb. And if April showers bring May flowers and not snow, we would think we were in gardening heaven!

After all, how many nights can we spend curled up with our seed catalogs and gardening books dreaming about planting before we become desperate for the feel of sun-warmed dirt on our hands? April and early May can be frustratingly cold and dreary one day and warm and sunny the next. What's a gardener to do?

The key word for gardening in northern Michigan in spring is patience. There are many gardening tasks we can accomplish in April and early May, but timing is everything. When those first warm days arrive, we are drawn to the garden. We can't wait to get outside and start digging. Before you start working the soil, try this simple trick. Take a handful of soil and squeeze it into a ball. If the soil

breaks apart easily when pressed gently with a thumb and finger, it is ready to work. If it stays in a ball, it is still too wet and working it can cause it to become compacted and hard.

(Remember making mud pies?) Wait a few days and try again.

In the meantime, if you didn't do so in the fall, get the gardening tools out of storage and clean and sharpen them. When it's too cold to work outside, start some plants inside from seed to set out in the garden after the last frost. Annuals such as marigolds, tomatoes, celosia and zinnias only need four to six weeks from sowing before they are ready to put into the garden. Maybe this is the year to try growing your own tuberous begonias and dahlias. They can be started indoors in pots and then planted in the garden after the danger of frost has passed.

Some cold hardy annuals such as cosmos, cleome, larkspur and sweet peas can be sown directly in the garden where they will be growing. In the perennial garden, remove the winter mulch from the beds, but avoid working the soil if it is still wet.

Cut back any perennials you may have left for winter interest or didn't get to last

fall and firm back in the ground any plants that may have heaved out over the winter. This is a good time to set support stakes before plants get too tall. Perennials that bloom in mid-summer or later can be divided now.

Pruning is also a task you can perform in the spring, but knowing the proper time to prune can be confusing. Here are a couple of general rules to follow: Trees and shrubs that bloom early (forsythia, lilac, rhododendron) bloom on last year's growth (old wood) and should be pruned immediately after flowering. Shrubs that bloom in summer on new growth (spirea, potentilla) can be pruned in spring.

Shrubs grown primarily for their foliage rather than showy flowers should be pruned in spring before new growth begins. Pruning plants just before new growth begins in the spring allows plants to recover quickly and stimulates growth.

Some trees such as birch, maples, yellowwoods and walnuts, should not be pruned in the spring because they 'bleed.' Oak trees should only be pruned in late fall to avoid being infected with the oak wilt fungus.



BY JEANINE RUBERT
Local columnist

Whatever April brings, one thing is certain, a new gardening season is an invitation to a fresh start. We have the chance to avoid all the mistakes we made in last year. In fact, that's one of the things I love about gardening: There's always a second chance!

I read somewhere that it doesn't matter so much what you plant as that you plant, because plants alone will never make the garden. Until next month...keep dreaming green!

If you have any comments or questions, feel free to e-mail Pine Hill Nursery owner Jeanine Rubert at: jrubert@pinehill-nursery.com.



In the winter Home edition, a writer humorously told of coping with critters coming indoors, including a battle with bats. This prompted a note from Ken Hogarth from Hogarth's Pest Control. "Live trapping, relocating them and then sealing (their entry) is the best. Last summer, I took 350 bats out of one house," he said, as shown above. He added that bats can create health issues other than just leaving droppings in attics.

GARDEN FACTS

Good bugs vs. bad bugs

Not every bug in your garden is a pest, and not every solution needs to be a pesticide. Here's a list of plants you can grow to attract beneficial insects and repel the nasty ones:



BENEFICIAL INSECTS	PLANTS TO ATTRACT INSECT
Assassin bugs	Alfalfa, carrot, goldenrod
Damsel bugs	Alfalfa
Lacewings	Carrot
Lady beetles	Alfalfa, yarrow, goldenrod
Syrphid fly	Buckwheat, candytuft, fennel
Tachinid fly	Coriander, fennel, white sweet clover
Yellowjackets	Ivy, sweet white clover, carrot

INSECT PEST	PLANTS TO REPEL
Ants	Marjoram, mint, oregano, onions
Aphids	Chives, garlic, marigolds, mint
Moths	Sage, rosemary, thyme
Cabbage worms	Tomatoes, celery
Colorado potato bugs	Green beans, marigold, flax
Flies	Basil, tansy
Mosquitos, ticks	Garlic

SOURCES: www.usgardenpests.com



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