

Gardening Notes for March

March can be such a finicky month! Several years ago, there was a long warm spell followed by two nights of extremely cold temperatures. The result was a massive dieback of Bigleaf Hydrangeas and a resulting loss of blooms for that year! Some years we see snow storm after snow storm, while some years it is merely rain. So far it has been a cold winter with more snowfall than recent years. Keep referring to your notes or diary from last year as to when you sowed seed and performed other chores as you need not reinvent the wheel. It is also interesting to track whether various plants are awakening earlier or later than in years past. Also, keep making notes for this year so that you can see if any of the changes you made yield better results!

Things to do:

Garden

- Finish removing excess leaves and/or winter evergreen boughs from early sprouting perennials and bulbs.
- Finish, or perhaps start cutting back ornamental grasses and perennials. Remove the foliage of acaulescent Hellebores (Hellebores that produce flowers from the crown, not the tips of last year's stems), such as *Helleborus x hybridus* cultivars or *Helleborus atrorubens* pictured at right. Where only a few Hellebores are featured, try to tend to this as early as possible in the month so the declining foliage does not distract from the flower display. Watch for emerging flower stems and buds so as not to accidentally remove a flower! Where large masses of Hellebores are featured, I prefer not to remove the foliage, but rather leave it as mulch.
- Cut and remove shrub or small tree stems that may have broken during strong winter winds and snows.
- March is the time to finish pruning! Finish removing up to 1/3 of the older stems of Lilacs, Japanese Kerria, Forsythia, Slender Deutzia, Weigela and other multi-stemmed flowering shrubs that bloom on last year's growth or wood.
- For pruning *Hydrangeas macrophylla*, remove a few of the oldest and most highly branched of the gray colored stems. Do not remove the



cinnamon-colored stems since they are the youngest. For *Hydrangea arborescens* it is best to cut the entire plant near the ground as it will bloom on new growth.

Hydrangea paniculata blooms on new growth, but the degree of pruning depends upon the density of the flower petals and how much rain water it holds. It can be cut back more aggressively if they have a more open panicle such as displayed by 'Fire and Ice' (pictured above right). Plants with dense flower panicles like 'Limelight' (pictured at right) should receive a light pruning by removing 2-3' of last year's growth. A heavy pruning will result in longer and weaker stems that cannot support a heavy wet flower, resulting in the stem bending downward and looking unattractive.



- Purple and Golden Smoke Bush in the mixed border are best stooled or cut back to 6-12", providing an attractive habit and great foliage color. This treatment will sacrifice summer flowers, yet provide a great foliage plant for pairing with various perennials or annuals.

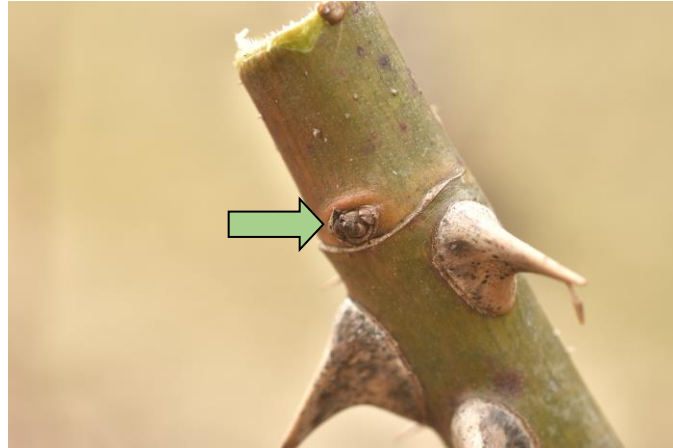


- Red or Golden Stemmed Dogwoods and Willows should be stooled or cut back to 3-12" either annually or every 2-3 years to encourage new shoots. These new stems will sport the best red or golden stem color. I have had great success with stooling golden stemmed willows (*Salix alba* 'Britzensis') annually as pictured above. The base of the plant is located at the tip of the arrow.
- *Vitex* (Chaste Tree) can be cut back hard (to 12") or moderately (to 4'), depending upon how tall you wish the plant to grow in your Garden – the less you cut it back, the taller the stature of the plant for this season.
- Prune Butterfly Bushes back to 12-18" in height, and Russian Sage, Lavender, and *Caryopteris* back to approximately 6". Do not prune Rosemary plants in spring, but rather wait until summer to shape and/or harvest stems.
- Prune 2-6' long stems of Forsythia and Pussy Willow to bring inside for forcing or to simply



enjoy the open blooms. *Salix* 'Mount Aso' is an attractive pink flowered form of Pussy Willow, selected for the cut flower industry (pictured above right). Once the flowers are no longer effective, the plant can be cut back heavily or lightly. The harder it is cut back, the longer the shoots and greater the potential flower display next spring! When pruned heavily, the overall shape is also more attractive.

- Edge bed-lines and lightly re-mulch bed areas. If the beds were mulched last year, only 1-2" of new mulch will be needed unless there was significant erosion or the mulch was removed with the autumn leaves! Remember, shredded leaves also make a great mulch!
- Don't use fabric under the mulch as it will eventually restrict O₂ movement, creating more shallow roots.
- Prune shrub roses back by about ½. For hybrid Tea Roses, cut plants back by ½, making certain that you cut to an outside facing bud. Those small red dots (as pictured at the tip of the arrow) that are typically subtended by an encircling leaf scar from last year are leaf buds. As a rule of thumb for all rose pruning, make the cut above the leaf bud equal to the diameter of the stem.
- Remove your *Canna*, *Colocasia*, *Alocasia* or *Musa* tubers from their winter storage boxes near month's end, pot them up in an adequately sized container, and place near a sunny window. They will sprout best if bottom heat is provided, but that is not necessary. Water sufficiently to keep the soil moist but not wet until you start to see signs of life.
- Bring *Brugmansia* and Edible Figs out of the dark basement or closets, start to water regularly and place near a warm sunny window to encourage the start of new growth.
- Any *Plumaria* (common name of Frangipani) that was stored by hanging them bare root in the basement should also be potted up and brought into an area with bright light.



Bulbs

- Watch for newly emerging bulbs. Collectively, this group of plants should be called geophytes since not all are true bulbs! The foliage is often difficult to see as it emerges and can be stepped on while attending to other chores. Plants like



Bulbocodium vernum (now *Colchicum vernum*), commonly called Spring Meadow Saffron (pictured above) have protective dark purple leaves that are difficult to see and surround the bud as it emerges. Such cheerful plants are certainly worth protecting!

- Spring is a great time to divide and spread Geophytes (bulbs!) about your Garden. Most 'bulbs' can be dug and divided while in bloom or following bloom while in foliage. Obviously, it makes it easy to see the location of the plants to be dug while they are still in leaf!
- If your daffodils have developed floppy foliage and are lackluster in flowering, the bulbs were probably planted too shallow. Narcissus, as is true of all geophytes (bulbs), should be planted in a hole 3-times as deep as the diameter of the bulb to the top of the bulb. So, if a Narcissus bulb is 2" in diameter, it should be planted in a 6-8" deep hole. If planted too shallow, it will produce an abundance of bulbils or offsets that are too small to flower. Hence, few to no flowers! Dig and divide the bulbs after flowering (provided it did flower) and plant to the proper depth.
- Consider some bulbs beyond Snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.) for color in March when making your order next fall. The image at right is of Snowdrops and *Crocus tommasinianus* (Snow Crocus). These species are among the many Crocus species that bloom early, are rodent resistant and produce foliage that remains neat and tidy. Many of the large flowered hybrid Crocus produce unattractive large foliage that lingers well into late May. *Crocus tommasinianus* also looks great interplanted into lawns! Pictured at right is *Crocus minimus* 'Spring Beauty' in late February. Another beauty!



Turf

- Thatch and aerate lawns. It is best to thatch and aerate the lawn when it is dry, allowing at least several days to pass after a rain.
- If Crabgrass was an issue in 2024, apply pre-emergent on lawns for Crabgrass control before Forsythia shows flower color.
- Take a soil sample and send to the soil testing lab via a mailer that is available at your local

extension office. The report will be emailed to your home and will provide information on how much fertilizer and lime to apply. Often, we do not need to add as much fertilizer as we may think and the excess will simply run off and pollute streams.

- Consider overseeding your turf with Tall Fescue seed for better drought tolerance.

Vegetables

- Once again, take soil samples from vegetable garden areas to determine pH and soil fertility requirements. As with turf, submit the sample via a mailer that is available at the local extension office. Excessive fertilizer often creates tall, leggy plants which is not what you want.
- Try not to walk on the soil when it is saturated, since it will compact, reducing the air spaces and damaging the soil structure.
- Seed out peas and radishes at the end of the month. The old rule of thumb was to sow the seed on St. Patrick's Day, which may be too early and cold in northern NJ, unless you are blessed with a sandy and well-drained soil.
- Start Broccoli seeds indoors in early March, tomato seeds from mid-March on and eggplant, peppers and parsley towards the end of March.
- Don't forget your containers! Lettuce can be a great ornamental as well as something for the dinner plate! I have always enjoyed combining lettuce with pansies for early décor. Many types of lettuce can be seeded out in a sunny window in early March for container planting in early to mid-April. Consider combining them with Pansies or Violas as seen above!



Houseplants

- If you have a straggly Coleus plant, you may wish to take cuttings and start new and stronger plants to move outdoors for summer display.
- Continue to turn your houseplants every couple of weeks. Often difficult to see, the plants will slowly grow towards the sun (a process called phototropism) and turning the plant will allow it to grow more evenly.
- As the day length continues to lengthen and plants begin to initiate new growth, the plants will require a more frequent



watering regiment near month's end.

- Repot succulents and houseplants to larger containers. Plants that have been kept indoors and have roots wrapping around the root ball when removed from the container should be repotted to a larger pot. Another sign of a need for repotting is if the roots have literally lifted the plant and the soil up to the lip of the pot and all the water runs over the rim when watered. When repotting, shake off some of the previous soil, prune off any decaying roots and repot in a container that is 2" +/- larger in diameter. If the plant is a succulent, use a well-drained potting media containing bark and large perlite and replant in a terra cotta pot, providing improved aeration to the roots.
- Many succulents can be propagated by simply laying a leaf on top of the soil or even on a bench top (*Echeveria* leaves are pictured above). A new plantlet and roots will typically appear at the base of the leaf within several weeks!
- If your succulent has become too leggy, as often happens with age, you can cut off an upper portion of the plant that has foliage, let the wound callus over by laying it on a table for 3-5 days and then stick the rosette back into a container with well-drained potting soil. The stem will typically regenerate new roots and a new plant!
- Remove any tired or half-brown foliage from your houseplants and start to fertilize at month's end. You can either provide a 2 to 4-month granular feed or a ½ dilute liquid feed every month through September. Remember, the soil in containers has little to no nutrient value of its own. As the days become longer, the plants will start to grow and the extra feed will be appreciated.

Education

- Rainy March days are also good to catch up on some reading and learning about our native pollinators and how you can help. I recently read an article by Dr. Laura Russo at the U. of Tennessee. Her research shows that if you plant native plants, the pollinators will come, regardless of what your neighbor has planted! She also points out the advantage of planting a diversity of plant families, allowing some to be good at providing nectar and others for providing protein and lipid rich pollen!
- Above all else, find time to visit a local arboretum and take note of some new plants to add to your March Garden. Below is the pink flowered form of White Forsythia (*Abeliophyllum distichum* 'Roseum') at Frelinghuysen Arboretum and above right is an image of the flowers. Granted, it is



native to Asia, which seems contradictory to my thoughts above. Fortunately, Dr. Doug Tallamy has also shown that up to 30% of your landscape plants can be non-native with no adverse impact on pollinators. It has the great advantages of being deer resistant, highly fragrant and very low maintenance. Unfortunately, they are rarely carried in garden centers since they bloom in March before most gardeners start shopping. They are best purchased from specialty nurseries or from mail order sources. Regardless, they are worth the effort and you will be the envy of your gardening friends! Consider too how you could make the garden composition with the *Abeliophyllum* even more stunning by underplanting it with some March blooming bulbs such as *Chionodoxa* (now *Scilla*) *luciliae* 'Alba' (as seen above). Certainly, with a little thought, the color compositions for the spring garden are as long as they are beautiful!



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