March Gardening Tips for Los Angeles County Residents

by Yvonne Savio

This is the month when most gardeners finally get out into the garden. Until now, it's been too chilly, even during sunny weather, for most people to want to do much outdoor work. And, this year, it's been raining and raining and raining..Now, spring warmth tempts us outside, and the chance of late frosts is less and less.

In Spring, oranges have both deliciously fragrant blossoms and ripening fruit. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

Vegetables and Fruits

Outdoors, sow or transplant beets, carrots, celery, chard, herbs, jerusalem artichokes, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuces, green onions, bulb onion seed and sets (be sure to get summer- maturing varieties), parsley, peas, peanuts, potatoes, radishes, shallots, spinaches, strawberries, and turnips. Transplant broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, and kohlrabi seedlings.

Herbs to start from seed include anise, basil, chervil, chives, cilantro (coriander), dill, fennel, lavender, marjoram, oregano, parsley, and savory; transplant mint, rosemary, sage, tarragon, and thyme (these don't come "true" from seed).

Herbs make great landscaping plants, as well. Chives add attractive, spear-like foliage among blooming plants. Rosemary and wooly thyme make attractive, drought-tolerant, trouble-free ground covers.

Peas and other legumes will germinate better when an innoculant of nitrogen-fixing bacteria is used. One way to dust the seeds is to pour them into the package of innoculant, fish them out, and plant them. Wetting the innoculant gets more of it to stick to the seeds. I find it quicker and less messy to pour a line of innoculant directly into the furrow, place the seeds on top of it, then gently draw the soil over the seeds, and water it all in.

Indoors, sow eggplant, peppers, and tomatoes for transplanting into the garden in late April or early May.

Cucumbers, eggplants, melons, and squash can also be started indoors but require special handling, as they don't transplant well if their root systems are damaged. Sow several seeds in a large container, thin them to the single strongest plant when the second set of true leaves has developed, and--when nighttime temperatures outside are moderate--carefully trans-plant the entire unit after very gently removing the container.

For an attractive array of lettuce flavors, textures, and colors, choose varieties from as many as you can find--dark greens, light greens, reds, bronzes; butterhead, looseleaf, romaine, and crisphead. Don't bother with "iceberg" type crispheads because they don't have time to develop heads before summer heat arrives, when they'll go to seed. Replant the others every three weeks for continuous harvests of young, sweet succulent leaves and heads. Choose varieties that are heat-resistant, bolt-resistant, and less likely to turn bitter when they mature during hot weather.

Bok choy's thick stalks and leaves offer substantial but tender and tasty greens during cool weather. Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

Soaking seeds prior to planting--or planting seeds in soil that is too wet--may do more harm than good. When seeds take up water too quickly, their outer coverings cracks. This allows nutrients to leak out, and disease organisms to enter. Beans are especially prone to this problem.

Be gentle with all seedlings: handle the little plants by their root clumps or leaves rather than stems, and never squeeze them tightly. They will grow new leaves and roots, but can't develop new stems.

Sweet potato sets can be started indoors now for planting outside in May. Place small-to-medium sized tubers in a container that drains well, and cover them with light, sandy soil or planter mix. Maintain a damp but not soggy moisture and a 70 to 75 degree tem-pera-ture in bright light. Sprouts will be ready for trans-plant-ing in four to six weeks.

An easy way to start sweet potato sprouts--and give yourself an ornamental plant at the same time--is to sprout a tuber in a glass or jar filled half-way with water. Shoots will sprout from the top half, and root from the bottom half. You may even decide you like the foliage so much, you'll keep it growing as a houseplant, perhaps stringing the vines around a window.

To plant the sweet potato shoots into the garden, care-fully pull or cut the nine-to-12-inch shoots from the starter root, retaining attached roots. Plant these 12 inches apart in sandy, well-drained soil. Water them in well with a half-strength solution of a balanced fertilizer, and shade them from the hot mid-day sun for a week.

This is the last month to transplant artichokes, asparagus, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, and rhubarb; also strawberry, blackberry, and raspberry roots so they'll bear fruit well this year.

Pluck off strawberry blooms through May--or whenever the warm weather has settled in for good--to concentrate the plant's first real burst of fruiting energy into large sweet berries rather than small tart ones. Unless, of course, you're desperately waiting for that very first berry, even if it is tart.

When harvesting broccoli, cut the head at an angle with a sharp knife. Snapping or cutting flat across the stem leaves creates an uneven surface where water can collect--since a callous can't form, decay can start. Also, cutting too far down the stem, where it is hollow, provides a cavity that can collect water, and decay can set in. Excessive nitrogen, making the plant grow too fast, causes a hollow stem.

Harvest asparagus spears when they're three-eighths of an inch wide or larger. Cut them no lower than soil level to avoid damaging the crown. Harvesting smaller spears, or harvest-ing for too long a period, especially from young plants, weakens the plant and lessens later harvests. Be overgenerous towards the young plant by not harvesting too much, and your plant will increase future harvests because it has gained strength.

Harvest pea pods as they are ready, depending on the variety. Allowing them to mature too fully on the vine will stop further blossoming.

Feed bulb onions with a 10-10-10 fertilizer to encourage bulb-ing. Sets that send up flower seed stalks instead of forming large bulbs were perhaps not sufficiently dormant when they were planted, or they were larger than dime-size and going to bolt anyway. To delay bolting, snap off the stalk at the base.

Citrus and avocado trees do best when they're planted from late this month through May--as the weather warms up. Choose a southwest exposure that is protected from the wind, for the best protection from cold weather and frost. Plant them on a mound or in a raised bed so water drains away from the roots. Rub suckers off trunks as they appear. Tape together or remove broken branches. Paint trunks and large limbs with a matte-finish, off-white interior latex paint mixed half and half with water to prevent sunscald.

Don't try to rush growth of nectarines, peaches, or plums by providing too much nitro-gen. This contributes to generally poor fruit quality--poor color development, delayed maturity, softness, and reduced storageability. Too much vegetative growth from excessive nitrogen can also result in poor fruit set for the follow-ing year. If the trees have good growth with dark green leaves in the spring, they have sufficient nitrogen.

Tree roots can extend almost four times the distance from the trunk to the dripline. The longest ones--the "feeder" roots--are near the soil surface. When planting the tree, dig the planting hole twice the size of the rootball, and turn over soil a foot deep for that distance again further out. Incorporate some compost and other organic matter to help keep soil uncompacted. Then, new roots can easily reach out into this native soil and become well-established. In addition, keep walking, decks, and other heavy-traffic and construction at least five feet away from the trunk, so feeder roots won't be harmed.

Ornamentals

Ranunculus are the delight of Spring's "minor" bulbs.Photo by Yvonne Savio, © UC Regents, 2000.

Sow or transplant achillea (yarrow), ageratums, alyssum, aquilegia, gazania, asters, baby-blue-eyes, baby's breath, bachelor buttons, balsam, fibrous begonias, calendulas, campanulas, candytufts, chrysanthemums, cinerarias, clarkias (godetia), cleomes, cockscombs (celosia), coleus, coralbells, coreopsis, cosmos, Shasta daisies, delphiniums, dianthus, four-o-clocks, forget-me-nots, foxgloves, gaillardias, gazania (African daisy), hollyhocks, impatiens, linarias, lobelias, lupines, marguerites, marigolds, mignonettes, morning glories, moss rose (portulaca), nasturtiums, nemesias, nicotianas, pansies, petunias, phlox, California and Iceland and Oriental and Shirley poppies, primroses, rudbeckias, salvias, scabiosas (pincushion flower), schizanthus (butterfly flower), snapdragons, statice, stocks, sunflowers, sweet peas, sweet williams, tithonias, torenias, verbenas, vincas, violas and zinnias.

Wait to plant bougainvilleas until later this month or in April, after all threat of frost is past.

Wildflowers can still be sown and are suitable in many areas where other plantings don't seem to thrive.

Consider landscaping with plants that thrive under conditions of drought and neglect. Flowering annuals include alyssum, cosmos, gazania, geranium, helichrysum, marigold, morning glory, phlox, portulaca, thunbergia, verbena, vinca, and zinnia. Shrubs include Australian fuchsias, ceanothus, coffee berries, cotoneasters, pineapple guavas, manzanitas, and rockroses, and verbenas (an especially good ground cover).

Many beautiful flowering shrubs are naturally drought- resistant and can help birds and small animals survive next winter by providing food and habitat. Dwarf pomegranate, pyracantha, and barberry are excellent choices for fall and winter color.

Perennials with great tolerance for drought include achillea, anaphalis, artemisia, asclepias, coreopsis, daylily, dianthus, echinopsis, eryngium, gaillardia, lavandula, potentilla, salvia, santolina, sedum sempervivum, stachys, thyme, and veronica.

Perennials that require plenty of water are astilbe, canna lily, fern, gentian, geum, globeflower, lily, lobelia, loosestrife, monarda, primrose, ranunculus, sweet woodruff, valerian, and violet. Plant these in partial shade, and they'll require less irrigation; they'll bloom less prolifically, however.

Divide and replant perennials that are crowded or that had sparse bloom last season. These include agapanthus, Japanese anemone, aster, coral bells, Michaelmas and Shasta daisies, daylily, fountain grass, iceplant, ivy, lantana, phlox, verbena, and yarrow.

Water the area the day before to ease digging up the entire root systems. When you separate the clumps, make sure each has a good portion or root system. Add humus to the new planting area, spread roots out, and water to settle them in.

Plant summer-blooming bulbs, corms, and tubers-- including acidanthera, agapanthus, tuberous begonias, caladiums, calla lilies, canna lilies, dahlias, gladiolus, hemerocal-lis, tuberous iris, ixias, tigridias, tuberoses, and watsonias. Repeat plantings through May for continuous bloom through the summer.

If you still have some unplanted spring-blooming bulbs that are firm and solid, plant them immediately in rich soil. They'll probably not bloom this year, but they'll develop further and bloom next year. If not planted, they'll shrivel away to nothing.

These left-over bulbs can also be potted up for forcing. Place them in the refrigerator for eight to ten weeks, keeping the soil moist but not soggy. They should bloom after another three weeks in a brightly lit area.

Cut daffodils and irises exude a substance that shortens the life of other cut flowers. So, place them in their own container of water for about six hours after they're stems are cut. Then, use another ocntainer with new water to make an arrangement with other types of flowers. Add a floral preservative or use one part lemon-lime soda (not diet) to two parts water. Keep the vase away from heaters or sunny windows to lengthen the bloom time.

Fuchsias flower on new wood, so prune either severely for compact growth or lightly for a more draping appearance. Continue to pinch and groom fuchsias regularly throughout the season to direct new growth and encourage more blooming.

Root cuttings of dianthus, dusty miller, euryops, felicia, fuchsias, geraniums, iceplant, lavenders, marguerites, mums, saxifrages, sedums, and succulents. Bury three or four nodes in soil amended with humus. Keep the replanted holes moist until you see new growth; then lessen the frequency--but not length of time--of watering. Planting several cuttings in each hole will assure that at least some take--so you don't have to replant the spots that died--and the area will fill in more quickly.

Scented geraniums offer a variety of garden fragrances and delicately-shaped foliage. Scents include almond, apple, apricot, coconut, lemon, lime, nutmeg, peppermint, and rose. Shapes and textured foliage vary from plain green round leaves to those lacy, rippled, variegated ones.

Prune azaleas, camellias, and rhododendrons after the last flower has wilted but before new foliage growth has begun--this is when the buds for next year's blooms set. Pruning this new growth will remove next year's color. The proper timing for pruning can be as early as February or as late as June, depending on the variety and the weather. Feed plants with cottonseed meal, and renew their acid mulch. Keep their roots evenly moist, but not soggy, throughout the growing season. This means providing a consistent and somewhat frequent watering, especially during hot weather.

Rub off new, unwanted foliage on roses, especially when it points in toward the center of the bush. When the growth is young, this pruning is easy--just the flick of a fingernail will do the job.

Some trees do best when transplanted in the spring, when warm soil and air speed healthy root growth. These include Nootka cypress, golden-rain tree, hornbeam, magnolia, English and red and white oaks, poplar, tulip tree, tupelo, and zelkova.

Newly planted trees may need support for a year while they develop strong root systems and trunks. First, remove the stake that came from the nursery. Into the ground on either side of the trunk and a foot out from it, drive two sturdy one-inch or two-inch wide stakes about 16 deep. About two-thirds the way up the trunk, tie loops from each stake around the trunk; use "soft" material like stockings or rags or old garden hose pieces. Tie the loops loosely so the trunk can sway gently in the wind--this strengthens the trunk and stimulates strong root growth. Remove the stakes after a year.

Lawns have begun growing vigorously again, so they need their spring feeding and more frequent attention to mowing. Keep the mower engine tuned and the blade sharpened for quick, clean cutting of the grass blades. Ragged edges die back and invite diseases.

General

Raised beds with lots of organic matter dug in provide "growing-only, no-walking" areas that encourage extensive healthy root growth and allow more thorough drainage.

An average of six hours of direct sun daily is the minimum amount necessary for leaf and rooting crops like lettuce and carrots; more is necessary for blossoming and fruiting crops like tomatoes and squash.

After clipping and digging in green manure crops, wait about two weeks before transplanting vegetable and flower seeds or seedlings. This will allow the greenery to decay sufficiently to provide nutrients to the new plantings. The heat produced from the decomposing green manure will burn seeds trying to sprout or transplants trying to get settled in. grow.

To loosen clay soil and provide slowly-released nutrition, add up to 50% organic matter--leafy material, straw, grass clip-pings, and non- greasy kitchen vegetable scraps. San will not do the job--remember that contractors mix sand and clay and water to make cement. Continue applying organic matter as mulch throughout the year. Turn it all under in the fall for a rich and friable soil in the spring.

Teach your plants to grow deeply for moisture. In spring, for average soils, water deeply only every two to three weeks. By the time that summer's heat arrives, plant feeder roots will be growing deeply for moisture, and the plants won't need watering more frequent-ly than once a week during very hot spells.

One inch of irrigated water will soak down to different depths, depending on how heavy your soil is: 12 inches deep in sandy soil, nine inches deep in loamy soil, but only three inches deep in clay soil. Plant root zones generally reach from 2 to 12 inches down.

Clay soil, because it is so compact, can be watered a little each day for two or three days to allow absorption down that far, rather than a lot of runoff by watering once for a long time. Clay soil will retain this moisture for a much longer period than sandy soil, which is very porous. Soil with a lot of organic matter in it is the best--it holds lots of water but still allows air in for best plant root growth.

Arbor Day is celebrated in California on March 7 in honor of horticulturist Luther Burbank's birthday. Burbank is famous for his work improving varieties of flowers (like Shasta Daisy), fruits (Santa Rosa Plum), grains, grasses, vegetables (Russet Burbank Potato), and trees.

Trees and plants are especially important as nature's filtering system. Each day, the average person uses 35 pounds of oxygen--all of it coming from plants and trees. They literally filter the air by collecting dust and pollutants in the air before they reach our lungs. They make our life more peaceful by providing a sound barrier, filtering out noise. Trees mask unattractive sights, as well.

Trees cool homes in summer--one tree can have the same cooling effect as ten room-size air conditioners. In the winter, deciduous trees let the sun shine through bare branches to warm our homes. Trees provide wood to burn for heat, lumber to build houses, and paper for books and newspapers. Tree roots lessen water runoff, and branches slow down wind. Commercial fruit and nut trees provide 26 million tons of food each year. Plant a tree!

Reduce damping-off of seedlings by providing good air circulation, cool temperatures, ample sunlight, and good drainage. To get rid of damping off fungus that's already appeared, make a strong chamomile tea by steeping three teaspoons in six cups of boiling water until it cools. Water the seedlings with this tea for two or three times in place of plain water until all signs of damping-off have vanished.

Aphids, mealybugs, and scale can be dispensed with a strong blast from the hose (support the branch or bloom with one hand to brace it against the force of the spray), or rub them off with a gloved hand.

To discourage snails and slugs from eating a prized crop, try surrounding the area with the spiky round fruit pods of the sweet gum tree. The abrasive surface of the ping-pong-sized balls is uninviting for the slugs to crawl across. The balls continue their usefulness after rain or irrigation, unlike ashes or other fine granular substances that must be reapplied.

Another technique is to fence out the snails and slugs. Unweave the top one-half inch of a three-inch strip of aluminum screening, and bend the exposed vertical wires to face outward when it's stapled to a baseboard. Snails and slugs can climb the screening but can't pass over the spikes without sticking themselves or falling off backwards, so they avoid it.

Snails and slugs love citrus trees. If you're not getting any citrus fruit, the snails have beat you to them. To keep them from crawling up the trunks, wrap a length of copper sheeting at least four inches wide around the trunk. Make sure to not leave gaps between the sheeting and the tree through which tiny, young snails can crawl. As the snails slime their way across the copper, an unpleasant electrical charge is created, which they avoid the next time.

If you rely on Snarol-type products in fighting snails and slugs, toss a handful up into citrus trees. Some of the pellets will settle on the foliage, and the remainder will fall onto the soil around the trunk--available for the the slimy creatures to eat wherever they are. Apply it just as the first spring growth and fruit buds are setting--the very tender tidbits that the snails love.

Apply a two-to-three inch layer of mulch onto the soil or in a window box next to the house to prevent mud from spattering and staining the siding when you water.

To easily determine the texture of your soil, fill a jar two-thirds full of water and the rest with soil, shake the jar well, and place it on a windowsill where you can observe the results without moving it. After a few days, the layers will be apparent, and you can make your "analy-sis." The heavy sand particles will settle first to the bottom of the jar, followed by the silt and then the clay. Organic matter will float. Good loam contains about 45% sand, 35% silt, and 20% clay.

If you've been improving your soil and want to see how far you've come, take another sample from some unimproved ground nearby, and test it the same way.

Feed the whole garden with a balanced fertilizer (one that has almost the same N-P-K numbers, such as 10-10-10 or 10-8-12). Most plants are beginning to grow actively now, whether they're established or have just been transplanted; and they all need this ready supply of food. Foliar applications always benefit plants--especially those in containers--with more immediate absorption of micronutrients, but they must be repeated more frequently for continuing benefit.

Get rid of weeds while they're small. Water the area to be weeded the day or so before, and the task will be much easier. A handy tool to use to pry up entire root systems is the pronged "asparagus fork" that looks like a bent stick.

Waiting until weeds grow larger--or, worst of all, reseed--means even more work. The big weeds will have big root systems that are hard to get completely out. If you pull out a weed that has already formed its seedhead, do not leave it in a walkway as mulch or compost it, unless you know your compost pile gets hot enough to destroy the seeds. The seeds will continue maturing, possibly enough to reseed and germinate--and you've recycled your weeds for another billion in another month.

SharpShooter, from Safer's, is an organic weed killer. Made from natural plant fatty acids, it kills weeds almost on contact. It doesn't harm fish, pets, or wildlife; yet planting or seeding the area can be done 48 hours after use.

An old fork or spoon will separate and lift seedlings gently from flats, and the handle (or a pencil or ice cream stick) can be used to ease transplants from individual growing pockets in segmented flats--all with very little damage to the tender roots.

Place a few buckets throughout the garden as handy waste baskets. Two can be left in the same area--one for items destined for the compost pile, and the other for items to be discarded.

Use a shallow, compartmented plastic basket with a handle as a garden carryall for seed packets, pruners, trowel, fork, and other small items. Before each day's initial trip into the garden, replenish the basket with packets of seed appropriate for planting at that time. As an empty spot develops in the garden, plant a few seeds.

Use a child's wagon for hauling moderate amounts of fertilizer, tools, and other items into the garden. Its four-wheeled stability makes the effort easy when a wheelbarrow-sized amount is unnecessary.

Banana peels can relieve itching from poison ivy, according to a reader of *Organic Gardening* magazine. Rubbing the inside of the peel over the rash stopped the itching, and continued applications over the next several days dried up the infection.