

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 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 somewhat warmer winter with less than average snowfall. 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 than in past years. 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 heavy winter winds and snows.
- March is 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 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 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.



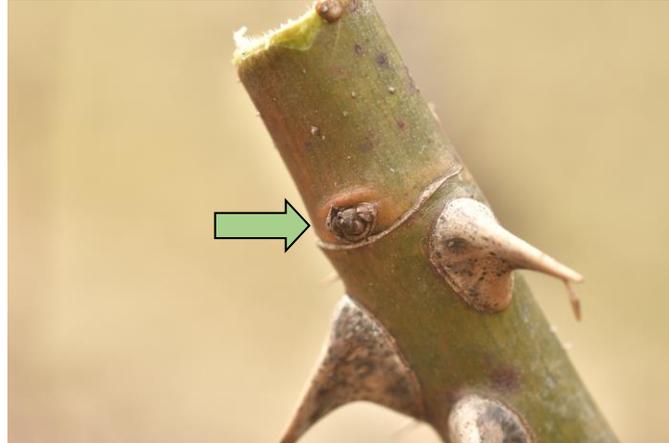
- Red or Golden Stemmed Dogwoods and Willows should be stooled or cut back to 3-12" either annually or every 2-3 years to encourage new shoots. These stems will sport the best red or golden stem color. I have had great success with stooling golden stemmed willows (*Salix alba* 'Britzensis') annually 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 plant will grow 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, bred 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!

- Edge bed-lines and lightly re-mulch bed areas. If the beds were mulched last year, only 1-2" of new mulch should be needed unless there was significant erosion or the mulch was removed with the autumn leaves! Remember, shredded leaves also make a great mulch!
- Prune shrub roses back by about 1/2. For hybrid Tea Roses, cut plants back by 1/2, making certain that you cut to an outside facing bud. Those small red dots (as pictured at right) that are typically subtended by an encircling leaf scar from last year are leaf buds. As a rule of thumb, 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 in the basement should also be potted up and brought into an area with bright light.
- 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 at right) 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 do all geophytes (bulbs) should be planted in a hole 3-times as deep as the diameter of the bulb. So, if the Narcissus bulb is 2" in diameter, it should be planted in a 6-8" deep hole. If it was 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 species of Crocus 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!



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 2023, 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 any phosphates which may end up polluting streams.
- Consider overseeding your turf with Tall Fescue seed for better drought tolerance.

Vegetables

- Once again, take soil samples from turf and 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.
- 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 at right!



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 should be repotted in spring if they have roots wrapping around the root ball when removed from the container. 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

- 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. 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 located in specialty nurseries or from mail order sources. Regardless, they are worth the effort and you will be the envy of your gardening friends!



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