

GARDENING TIPS FOR BOSTON.COM

By Sharon Soltzberg

APRIL

Don't start digging or planting in the garden too soon. Even seeds of cool-season plants like peas and lettuce may rot if the soil is too cold and wet. To test the soil, squeeze it in your hand; if, when you open your hand, the soil stays in a tight ball like clay and doesn't crumble, it is probably best to wait a little longer. Then work the soil as shallowly as possible, adding compost.

Read the labels on the seed packets carefully. Some vegetable crops tolerate cool weather well and can be planted as soon as the soil can be worked, but most crops require a soil temperature of at least 55 degrees. Some plants such as tomatoes, peppers, and basil need to wait until there is no danger of frost at night, so these seeds must be started early indoors.

On days with temperatures above 40 degrees and nights not dropping below freezing, consider applying safe horticultural oil spray to kill overwintering insect eggs or pupae on plants susceptible to insect damage such as roses, crab apples, and many others. Read the label on the container carefully since a few kinds of plants, such as ferns and Japanese maples, may be damaged by oil sprays.

Get familiar with (look on the web at www.invasive.org) and keep on the lookout for invasive nonnative plants growing in your yard. Bittersweet vines, buckthorn bushes and trees, multiflora rose bushes, Japanese knotweed, and garlic mustard are common thugs in our area. You can pull these invasive plants out, roots and all, when they are small but once they get established, they are a challenge to eliminate.

MAY

Before transplanting, "harden off" seedlings that were started indoors by putting them in protected places in the yard during the day and gradually exposing them over a week to full sun and wind and leaving them out day and night. This will stimulate the plants to secrete a thicker protective waxy

cuticle over their outside epidermal layer before being exposed fully to outdoor conditions.

Mow lawns high (2 1/2 – 3 inches) during the growing season so that grass will have deeper roots and greater drought tolerance, and will be able to out-compete weeds without the use of dangerous pesticides. Consider reducing the size of the lawn by planting groundcover plants in shady areas where lawns don't grow well and by expanding flower and vegetable plantings.

This is a great time to plant a tree. Trees convert sunlight into chemical energy, removing carbon dioxide from the air (a greenhouse gas contributing to global warming) and releasing oxygen that we need to breathe. Trees cool the air below them and are excellent sound absorbers. Trees can also save energy dollars. Evergreen trees on the northeast side of a house buffer cold winter winds, reducing heating costs. Deciduous trees on the south and west sides of a house provide shade in summer, reducing cooling costs, but let sunlight indoors when they are leafless in winter.

Mark where you would like to plant more bulbs next fall with stones or labels. Otherwise you might dig up previously planted bulbs, which won't be visible after their foliage dies back by early Summer.

JUNE

Weed the vegetable garden regularly to reduce competition from fast growing weeds. It is especially important not to allow the weeds to go to seed and multiply. Homemade, partly decayed compost makes a great weed-suppressing, soil-enriching mulch in your vegetable garden.

Mulching helps conserve water and prevents weed growth around woody plants, but don't put down more than 2-3 inches. Also, don't let the mulch touch the trunks of trees or shrubs. Good mulching materials include partly-decayed compost or leaves and pine needles.

Consider collecting rain from your downspouts in rain barrels to use in watering your vegetables and new plantings during the dry months ahead. Be sure to cover the barrel openings with mosquito-proof screening.

Use drip tape irrigation for watering your vegetable garden to reduce water consumption.

Water newly planted shrubs, trees, and perennials if there is not at least one inch of rain per week. Weekly deep watering is much preferable to a daily brief spray because it encourages deeper roots that help a plant survive occasional dry spells. Newly planted trees will need extra water during dry periods for at least the first two years.