

Beth Otway's Gardening Advice

Spring is a magical time. Cheerful spring flowers brighten our gardens, as we bask in the joy of nature's promise that there's so much more to come. This is such an invigorating and inspiring time, with much to see and do in the garden.

It's easier to pull up weeds and lift any unwanted plants now, before the borders become full of plant growth and the weeds are firmly attached and anchored into the ground or hidden amongst other plants. After weeding, apply a mulch of home-made or good quality compost. If you're looking to purchase compost, you'll find the results of my Compost Trials on my website, www.pumpkinbeth.com

This is the perfect time to create supports for tall growing herbaceous perennials. It's easy to put off doing this job, but you'll save yourself a lot of time in early summer, if you install a support framework now. Later in the season, herbaceous plants that have grown through their supports hold themselves with elegance. Whereas plants that have already flopped and have then been forced into an upright position tend to look uncomfortable in the border at best and as if they've lost a fight at worst!

Hazel or birch stems and branches can be used to make supports that are attractive, as well as functional. Making a support framework may sound complex and time consuming, but I can assure you that this is a simple task that won't take long. Choose young, flexible stems; simply push a stem into the soil and then bend to form a loop inserting the opposite end into the ground or bending it under another stem. Intertwine your supports under, over and around each other to form an open grid around the outer circumference and across the centre of the plant.

Gently rake lawns to remove leaves and surface debris. Keep

the mower blades high for the first few grass cuts of the year. Aim to remove the tips of the grasses on your first two cuts and then gradually lower the blades of your mower, as the season progresses.

Springtime gives us another opportunity to sow seeds of meadow flowers. Specially selected meadow seed packs are available at garden centres and nurseries; alternatively combine individual seed packs to create your own mix. As well as being delightfully pretty, meadow plants are also extremely beneficial to bees, insects, and wildlife. A small area of meadow creates a wonderfully relaxing and rather charming area of the garden. A lot less mowing is required to manage an area of meadow compared to looking after a traditional lawn. You'll find more information about meadows at www.pumpkinbeth.com.

If you would like to grow more plants that are beneficial to bees and other pollinating insects, then now is a good time to sow seeds of: sunflowers, single flowered forms of *Calendula officinalis*, *Papaver rhoeas* and *Papaver orientale* (poppies), *Nigella damascena*, *Centaurea cyanus*, *Verbena bonariensis*, *Cosmos bipinnatus*, and *Machaeranthera tanacetifolia*.

To achieve a good harvest of fruit later in the year, it's important to feed figs now. Weed around your plants and then apply a mulch of good quality, peat free compost. Carry out any weeding and mulching before you set about pruning your fig, so as to avoid coming into contact with the plant's white milky sap. The latex or white sap that figs bleed from their cut or damaged stems is an irritant that intensifies with sunlight. As a result, it's advisable to prune your plants in the late afternoon and wear waterproof gloves whilst pruning or tending to your plants. Wash your hands thoroughly as soon as you've finished. If your skin has come into contact with the fig's milky white sap act quickly: wash the area thoroughly, cover up and ensure this area of skin is not exposed to sunlight for a day or two.

Pruning figs: so, with your gloves on you're ready to examine your fig plants. Firstly, remove any dead wood; then cut back any frost damaged shoots. After this, the aim of your pruning is to create an open, spreading shape, which will let the maximum amount of sunshine and light in to the plant, to ripen the fruit. Now, remove any crossing branches or very overcrowded growth that's preventing sunlight from reaching the centre of the plant.

On older plants, cut one or two of the fig's oldest branches back, to leave a short stem of just one bud, about two and half inches (6cm) long. Your plant may not have any old stems to cut back or any crossing stems to remove, which is a good thing. It's not compulsory to remove a certain number of stems at this time, but as plants age, this practice helps to regenerate the plant and encourage new growth by simply removing one, two, or more of a plant's older stems, each year.

Pruning Cornus now will ensure your plants produce lots of colourful stems this winter. Cut back stems of established plants, taking them right back to about two inches (5-7cm) from the ground. After pruning, weed the ground around your plants and apply a mulch of good quality peat free compost, which will suppress weed growth and enrich the soil.

It's worth feeding your hedges this month. Hedges are formed from many plants growing closely together; as all the plants take water and nutrients from the soil, regular feeding is both beneficial and necessary. Apply Growmore, blood, fish, and bone, or a mulch of a good quality peat free compost.

It's worth applying feeds to roses, trees, shrubs now; you'll really see the benefits. Follow the instructions on the pack, and don't be tempted to over feed, as this is wasteful and can cause other problems – regular feeding is the way to go.

Spring is a great time to weed around hedges and to apply a

mulch of garden compost. Don't be tempted to trim your hedges in spring or summer, as birds are nesting at this time of year. Leave any hedge cutting until the start of September.

Ventilate glasshouses and use blinds or apply shade paint, to prevent your plants from being scorched by bright sunlight.

In the glasshouse or on a sunny window sill, sow seeds of: tomatoes, cucumbers, melon, courgette, celeriac, celery, peppers, cucumbers, onions, radish, and globe artichokes. If you haven't already, hang up yellow sticky traps in your glasshouse – these are very effective at controlling aphids, thrips, whitefly, and other glasshouse pests. Other traps are available on brown sticky paper but these are not nearly as effective, as it's the yellow colour that attracts the pests.

Plants grown in a protected environment miss out on the strengthening effects of the breeze, this often results in indoor raised plants becoming weaker, leggier plants than those grown outside. To strengthen your indoor grown plants, gently brush over your plants with your hands (or use a piece of card if you prefer), whenever you walk past. This action will simulate the effects of the breeze and help to strengthen your plants, making them stockier and more resilient.

If you're looking to propagate plants, take cuttings from Dahlias, Fuchsias, Heliotropes, Marguerites, and Pelargoniums, this month.

Divide chives, garlic chives, and sorrel now. Water your plants as you replant your divisions.

Plant early potatoes and shallots this month. It's also the perfect time to plant asparagus; it's always best to plant one-year old asparagus crowns. Thoroughly weed the area before planting your asparagus. Make sure you give your asparagus crowns a good soaking in a bucket of water; soak the crowns overnight, or for a few hours prior to planting in a well prepared and meticulously weeded bed.

Sow parsnips: maximise your space and harvest by intercropping your parsnip seeds with radish. Sow the two seeds in the same row – the radish seeds will germinate very quickly, they'll be harvested before the slow to germinate parsnips need the space. Make sure you use fresh parsnip seed each year, as the viability of parsnip seeds decreases very rapidly, so seeds that are more than a year old are unlikely to germinate.

Seeds of Brussels sprout, summer cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, kohlrabi, leeks, lettuce, onions, spinach, and turnip seeds, can all be sown outside, this month.

Sow broad beans outside now. Combine outdoor sowings of broad beans with an indoor sowing of *Satureja hortensis* (Summer Savoury), which can be started off under cover now. Later in the season, the Summer Savoury plants can be gently accustomed to cooler conditions and planted out next to your broad beans. Summer Savoury is a super plant to grow. Growing Summer Savoury alongside your beans is said to help ward off black fly, and if you cook them together, the Summer Savoury will enhance the flavour of your beans.

I love sowing sweet peas! You can sow sweet pea seeds outside this month. Sow your seeds directly in the soil where they are to flower or use tall pots that will accommodate the sweet pea plants' long roots. Sweet peas grow exceptionally well in peat free compost.

Don't forget to net fruit cages to protect your ripening fruit from birds and wildlife.

It's your last chance to plant snowdrops 'in the green' as they finish flowering. If you are buying snowdrops, please purchase your bulbs from a reputable supplier, to ensure the bulbs you buy are not taken from the wild. You'll find a list of reputable snowdrop suppliers on my website.

You'll find more gardening advice for March and April on my website, www.pumpkinbeth.com. Where you'll also discover

advice to help you create a meadow, information about plants that are beneficial for bees, butterflies, and pollinating insects, and you'll find the best composts from my Compost Trials. I've also put together a calendar of plant sales, a list of daffodil gardens and garden events to visit, and of course there's advice for growing houseplants and orchids, with lots of information about terrariums.