

Garden Club
Horticultural Hints
April 2019

Crocus and violets and squill, oh my!

Be careful out there! Ticks are hatching and looking for rides on any mammal that passes by. Stay out of tall grass (except to cut it down), wear pants tucked into tall socks, use insect repellents on your clothing, and check yourself for ticks when you come back inside. Lyme disease, anaplasmosis, babesiosis and erlichiosis (all now well established in New England) can ruin more than just one summer's gardening. Untreated, the effects can be debilitating years after the initial infection. And remember, dead poison ivy plants can still cause rashes.



This is a tick nymph, looking for its first blood meal – and to pass on some nasty diseases. Wear pants tucked inside tall socks and use repellent.



Close-up of the bark of burning bush, an invasive shrub

While the ground is soft, April is a great time to pull out invasive plants such as Japanese barberry, Japanese honeysuckle and burning bush. Make certain you get as much as the root as possible to prevent it from quickly growing back. Replace these with American natives such as blueberries and itea -- spring bloomers with fabulous fall color that lasts longer than burning bush (pictured above)

When lawns have dried, remove any debris by raking lawns with a spring-tined rake. Avoid the temptation (and the ads) to apply fertilizer or grass seed. Fertilizing and seeding are best done in the fall when the grass is not competing with annual weeds. New England lawns do well without a spring fertilization, but a thin (1/4 inch) top-dressing with compost will do wonders for it by adding beneficial soil organisms.



If you didn't have it tuned up in the fall, get your mower to the shop now—and sharpen or replace the mower blade. A dull blade tears the grass making it more susceptible to disease.





By mid-April — if the soil has dried out such that it crumbles when squeezed in your hand and has warmed up sufficiently — you can plant peas, spinach, lettuce, onions, beets and potatoes. Indoors, start tomato seedlings at the beginning of the month, cucumbers and squash late in April. Don't trust air temperatures: use a soil thermometer to ensure it isn't too cold to plant seeds

Beardless (Japanese or Siberian) irises need to be divided regularly. As they grow, the center of the plant weakens or dies. Dig out the clump, cut out 4 to 6 inch segments from the outer ring and discard the center. Plant your renewed irises in soil that has been improved with compost or other organic matter, making certain to keep them at the same depth as they were before.



Photo credit: Flower Patch Farm



Don't have your own compost? Closed bins (such as the Earth Machine) mean even gardeners on small lots can use their kitchen and garden waste to make compost and improve their soil naturally

Start the month by removing old mulch and any evergreen branches from your perennial beds —but stay out of the beds so you don't compact the soil. Hold off adding new mulch for a week to allow the soil to warm up. Remove now, by hand, any weeds that wintered over before they get stronger.



When you can walk about the garden without leaving footprints in soggy soil, cut down dead perennials before any new growth begins to show. Add the 'debris' of the cleanup to your compost heap

