



The Do's and Don'ts of Early Spring Gardening

By Heather Zidack, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

There's a well-known scene in the movie "Braveheart" where Mel Gibson's character, commands his men to "Hold!" as the enemy is rushing upon them. It's a scene that I often reference as an analogy for this part of the year. Daylight savings time has changed our clocks, the sunshine is warm, temperatures are reaching the "light jacket" level of comfortable, and we all feel spring rushing towards us with the promise of seedlings, flower buds, and fresh green leaves. With this, there are certainly plenty of chores that we can do right now to prepare, but there are others that we really should be waiting for a few weeks longer.

Houseplants may enjoy a short afternoon in the outdoor sunlight on these warmer days but resist the urge to put them outside full time until night temperatures consistently reach 50 degrees Fahrenheit. The occasional day trip is an effective way to help them transition from the protection of your indoor environment to full sun outdoors. More importantly, consider giving your houseplants a good spring cleaning. Repot or divide root bound plants, remove the winter dust from leaves with a damp rag, and trim out any dead or unsightly growth. Now they're ready for their spring debut!

Fertilizing is another task that many gardeners feel may be a chore to check off their lists early. This is a project that should wait a little bit longer. Often, fertilizer will push new growth in your plants. Pushing them too early can leave tender leaves and buds at risk of exposure to frost and freezing temperatures, actively slowing or stunting growth that you intended to give a boost to. In the same vein, grub control, pre-emergent, and many other synthetic materials used in the landscape require specific soil temperatures to be effective and it's still just too cold. Always read the label of any garden product to learn the best timing of any application. At this point in the year, consider doing a soil test. If you haven't done so before, it's great to have a baseline for planting and caring for your garden. If you've done it a few years ago – check it again! Things change and you may be surprised by what nutrients you need (or don't) since you last checked in.

It may still be a little early for mulch as well. Adding fresh mulch too early in the season can trap moisture and slow the soil from warming up to optimum growing temperature. Take this time to pull out grass and weeds that may have taken root in mulched beds and put this time into your hardscape. Look for tripping hazards to address like cracked, sinking, or heaved pavers. Check structures like pergolas, sheds, and even raised beds for rotting boards, warping, or structural damage. Repair as needed. Building new garden spaces is always an option! Create your punch list of projects that will need fresh paint or sealant. If the weather is going to be warm and sunny – consider power washing hardscapes and structures now.



Newly constructed raised bed ready for spring! Image by H.Zidack

Late winter/early spring is a fantastic time for pruning trees and shrubs in the landscape. It's ideal because there is great visibility, and the cooler temperatures prevent disease and insects from taking advantage of fresh wounds. You want to make sure you're pruning correctly, for the species and purpose of the trees and shrubs in your landscape – so do your homework! As a rule of thumb, roses, hydrangeas, and some hardy perennials tend to appreciate a later pruning and can vary between types within the species, so stay aware of what you have on your property to ensure success!

“But when do I get to play in the dirt?” That's next! For our outside plants, think about dividing perennials. Divisions at this point in the year make the plants much easier to handle for the gardener. Moving your plants now gives them a chance to “wake up in place” this spring. You will reduce concerns with transplant shock when you move plants ahead of their spring flush and our summer heat.

Indoors, stepping your seedlings up into larger containers gives them a little more breathing room as we wait for the season to start. Only transplant seeds when they've started to show 2-3 sets of true leaves and keep in mind that different species can have different needs. If you excitedly started your tomatoes too early, and now notice leggy stems, try transplanting them in plastic cups and burying them all the way up to their first couple sets of true leaves. They will put out even more roots along that covered stem and be even better prepared when you put them in the garden this season!



Seedlings that are leggy can be moved into plastic cups with holes in them and buried. Photo by H.Zidack

There are still plenty of projects that can be done while we wait for spring to come! If you have questions on spring garden projects or any other gardening topic, feel free to contact us, toll-free at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6247, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.