



ALLOTMENTS & GARDENS ASSOCIATION SALISBURY

April monthly planner of jobs to do

April has all the tingling pleasure of anticipation bolstered by gratification. It is spring and more is to come. It is close enough to winter for every hour of sunshine and shirt-sleeve warmth to be blessed, and not taken for granted. It is the month when most changes, most happens and arguably, for the gardener at least, there is the most to do. While it is a busy month, the days are stretching out, the soil is warming up and the garden calls like a siren. It is a month spilling over with energy and hope. As soon as the soil ceases to feel at all cold try to sow as many vegetable seeds as you can, using ground that comes free as the winter crops get cleared. There is a huge tactile and sensual pleasure in creating a good tilth in rich, crumbly soil and sowing lines of little seeds, knowing that most will grow to become a delicious harvest as summer progresses.

BASIC GARDENING JOBS

- **Deadhead** daffodils and tulips after blooming. This saves the plants spending precious energy on seed production and diverts it all to strengthen the bulbs for next year. Don't remove the yellowing leaves, but allow them to die back naturally.
- **Insert** twiggy prunings into the soil to support pea and bean crops.
- **Trim** heathers to keep them compact.
- **Flowers** with tall stems or annual and herbaceous climbers need supports put in place, ready to train in early growth. Tying in shoots or propping them up later risks damaging the plant and never looks natural. Clean up any structures or poles you've stored over winter, using them to make wigwams or arches. Make sure the frame supports the stems low down but keeps the flowers freestanding. For plants in pots, firm the frame securely down into the pot.
- **If** your shrubs or perennials flowered poorly last year, it's time to perk them up with a dose of granular or liquid fertiliser. Granular ones cost less and can be sprinkled at the base of the plant and water in. Always follow the packet instructions as over use may damage the plants.
- **Top** up gravel paths and scree beds.
- **Scrub** down the sides of large containers to remove algae and dirt that's gathered in winter.
- **Deter** cats from spoiling bare earth by laying twiggy prunings on top of it. This may be just enough to send them elsewhere.
- **Raised** beds are great for making vegetable growing convenient and accessible. You can buy modular beds or make your own from blocks, bricks or timber. Beds need to be deep enough for good root establishment and when sitting on soil, the roots can penetrate down. Make the bed at least 45cm deep and 120cm wide, so you can reach into it easily. Fill with good quality soil or loam potting compost and add a small amount of organic matter. You can pack plenty into a smaller space - try a mix of veg such as beans, courgettes, leafy greens and tomatoes. But you'll need to keep watering and feeding.
- **Rake** moss from lawns now to encourage grass to grow more vigorously. Bacteria-based products, or Sulphate of Iron, will kill moss, which can be raked off and composted when dead.
- **The** grass in the lawn could do with a boost in spring. Focus on weeding to reduce the competition for nutrients and moisture, and then give it a feed to strengthen the grass ready for the wear and tear it will endure during the summer.
- **Mowing** seems like a routine job that needs little skill, but how you do it is important for keeping your lawn in good health. For a fine quality lawn, use a machine that picks up the clippings. A cylinder mower makes the neatest cut but can't be used on uneven terrain. For most garden lawns, particularly if they're not level, a mower with a rotary blade does a great job. Start the season with a couple of high cuts, and then lower the blade for the weekly cut as the grass grows faster. Vary the direction that you mow to

avoid making tramlines and overlap each run slightly for a good finish. If the grass looks stressed in hot, dry spells, lift the blade higher again.

- **Grass** seed is slow to germinate on cold ground, but now that the temperature is warming up you can plan to sow a new lawn. You can also use this technique just fill bare patches. First, prepare the area by forking out any weeds then rake it level. Make sure the surface is firmed down evenly to avoid it settling and making a dip in the lawn. Finally, rake the top again to make a fine tilth. On larger areas, stand on a board to protect the soil's surface. Shake the seed well before you start sowing to mix the different sizes of grass seed. Test-sow a small area for practice, using the rate stated on the box, then sow as evenly as possible. Rake gently to work the seed into the surface, and then tamp down with the back of the rake to give the seed and soil good contact. Net the area to keep off pets and birds. Water the surface if no rain is forecast, with a watering can that has a fine rose, or use a hose with a fine spray attachment. Follow this up every few days if the weather remains dry.
- **Plant** containerised trees now before the season gets too warm. First, soak the pot. Dig out a hole the same depth but wider than the pot. Fork the base of the hole adding organic matter and a handful of bonemeal. Water the hole and tease out roots from the rootball before planting. Hold the stem upright while you add soil and firm it down.
- **A** green roof mostly looks after itself, but to keep it in great condition you will need to get up there in spring to remove any wind-blown weed seedlings and tree leaf debris that blocks light from your plants. Most green roofs are planted with low-maintenance succulents such as sedums, but if you've been more daring, plants may need trimming back now. All planting does best with a spring feed of granular fertiliser. Work from a platform ladder or similar and wear tools around your belt to keep your hands free when you move around. Have a kneeling board to spread your weight if you need to lean on the planting itself.
- **Check** tree ties.
- **Check** fruit cages and netting, mending all holes with thread or glue and patches, as holes will allow pests to access your summer harvest. Birds that get in cannot always exit and become distressed when trapped. Mesh with holes of up to 1.3mm will protect leafy crops from butterflies, moths and many other insects.
- **Water** newly planted vegetables and fruit trees whenever the weather is dry.
- **Plan** pea and bean supports and get them built before you sow outdoors or plant beans and peas. All climbing beans need strong upright structures to climb up and wind themselves through. Bean foliage is dense and heavy, so construct them to withstand summer winds. A tepee or A-frame arrangement about 2m high works well. Use bamboo canes or hazel poles pushed in at least 30cm deep and make sure they are firmly braced. Peas will scramble through tall branched prunings pushed in along the row or, if you are short of space, use netting pulled taut against a cane frame.

PESTS AND DISEASES

- **Young** plants are the most vulnerable to slug damage and can be completely eaten by these pests. Use a combination of measures for effective control that will reduce the overall population dramatically for the rest of the year. A combination of nematodes applied to the soil and organic slug pellets around the plants works well. Trapping with covers or baits is also useful.
- **Look** for aphids on roses and squash them
- **Look** out for the larvae of the viburnum beetle which are active now creating holes in leaves. This is the time to spray, using either organic or synthetic chemicals.
- **The** larvae of crane flies, leatherjackets, feed on grass roots, causing damage, and are indicated by birds pecking the lawn. Pesticides are available if you are concerned.
- **Look** out for a fluffy white wax, a sticky residue and black mould which will indicate you have an infestation of mealy bug. Wipe them off with a cloth and fatty acid based spray.
- **Look** out for scale insects which come in different colours and forms, but all are bump-like and suck sap from plants. They excrete honeydew, leading to sooty mould. Sprays are available but of limited effect on large plants.
- **Flea** beetle can be a problem this month, leaving tiny holes all over leaves. Plants do usually recover, though when they are badly affected it can stunt their growth.
- **Tackle** persistent weeds such as bindweed, dandelion, hairy bitter cress, cleavers, dock and creeping yellow cress which are growing fast, so get rid of them now to reduce this season's population and allow your plants to take hold without competition. Weed carefully to avoid damaging fragile new shoots. If

you find self-seeding garden plants that need to be controlled too, be brutal - don't let them swamp permanent plants and remove them from border edges.

- **Pigeons** are hungry and love eating brassicas so keep them netted.
- **Carrot** root fly lay eggs in soil in April and May so protect carrots with a fine mesh like environmesh.
- **Take** a close look at gooseberry and currant bushes in search of sawfly caterpillars - pick off or cut off any you find.
- **Continue** to check for 'big bud mite' on blackcurrants, the buds will actually look big and swollen if affected.
- **Cabbage** root fly can cause a problem by laying their eggs at the base of the stem of brassicas, so it is best to fit cabbage collars around the base to stop them.

WILDLIFE

- **Wildlife** will come to a pond whether you plant with native or non-native plants. Whichever you choose, use a good mix of marginal plants on the edge, floating plants across the surface and submerged plants at the bottom. Give birds and mammals an unplanted beach to get near the water for a drink.
- **Continue** to feed birds and make sure they have access to water in freezing weather.

VEGETABLES/HERBS

- **Continue** sowing batches of broad beans in soil that's had plenty of organic matter added to it, so you can enjoy a longer harvest. 'Bunyard's Exhibition' is a good variety to grow and can be purchased in the Trading Hut. Sow in double rows, with 30cm in-between and 1m between the double rows. Just push them into the soil at 20cm intervals.
- **Plant** out young Brussel sprout plants.
- **Support** young pea plants with pea sticks or mesh.
- **Plant** second early potatoes in first half of month followed by main crop in second half. Dig out a trench that's deep enough to cover the top of your tubers with at least 5cm of soil. Sprinkle some general fertiliser along the base of the trench then stand the tubers 40cm apart for both second earlies and maincrop varieties. Rake the soil back over and firm it down, leaving it slightly lower than ground level. This directs water to the newly growing potatoes until they emerge. Once the leaves start to appear, start pulling up more soil over them for protection against late frosts.
- **Thin** seedlings to recommended spacings.
- **Sow** dwarf beans and sweetcorn outdoors under cloches or fleece.
- **There's** still time to plant onions, shallots and garlic.
- **Vegetables** to be sown outdoors: Beetroot, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, kohlrabi, lettuce, leeks, Swiss chard, peas, sprouting broccoli, radish, spring onions, spinach, salad leaves, turnip. Parsnips and broad beans.
- **Vegetables** to be sown indoors: Aubergine, celery, courgette, cucumber, marrow, pumpkin, and squash. sweet peppers, tomato, globe artichoke.
- **It** makes sense to have a mixed potful of assorted herbs that you use regularly right by your back door. Sweet, savoury, tangy or subtle, the choice is up to you, and when one plant fades, you can prise it from the pot and replace it with another. Plant now but be aware that rampant herbs like mint will likely need a pot to themselves. Mint prefers moist soil, so needs little drainage, but most other herbs will only last in a pot of free-draining compost. The larger the container, the more herbs you can fit in and the less you'll need to water it in that sunny spot that most herbs love.
- **Sow** lettuces several times during the year to keep a supply going. Sow a few at a time and transplant them, or sow a row then crop the thinnings, leaving some to heart up later. Protect the seedlings from slugs.
- **There's** a knack to picking rhubarb without leaving the stubs of snapped stems behind. Pick from the outside, holding the stem low down and twist firmly away from the clump. You can continue to pick through the season but they are most tender in spring. Leave some stems to give the plant energy but remove and discard the toughest old stems to keep new growth coming. Mulch your plants with nitrogen-rich manure to encourage leaf growth. The blooms are spectacular but will ruin the crop. So cut off emerging flower stems and apply a nitrogenous liquid feed to discourage any more.

PLANTS/SHRUBS

- **Sow** a new batch of sweet peas outside. They will flower after autumn-sown ones. So extend flowering times.

- **Look** for self-sown seedlings from flowers you like. Gently dig up and space out to get more blooms in summer.
- **Prune** chaenomeles (ornamental quince) after flowering by cutting back side shoots to two buds or leaves. This will result in better blooms next year.
- **When** your dahlia seedlings are large enough to handle, prick them out into larger pots. Lift the seedling out of the tray using a dibber. Hold it carefully by the leaf and drop into a hole in the compost of a large pot and firm in. Keep the label with the seedlings, as dahlia varieties can all look the same until they flower. Soak the seedlings in their new pot before placing them in a light and warm spot to grow on.
- **Finish** moving and planting shrubs, so they can establish before hot and dry weather arrives.
- **Many** pelargoniums root readily from cuttings. Cut back mature plants this month and the fresh growth is ideal for propagation. Prepare the pots and the location where they'll take root in advance of taking the cuttings. Select healthy, non-flowering growth first thing in the morning. The cutting should have at least one pair of leaves below the growing tip and a length of stem below them. Cut just below a leaf joint, removing any lower leaves and small leaf-like stipules, and insert into a lightly tampered-down pot of free-draining compost that contains perlite which has been pre-watered, with the pair of leaves just above the surface. Keep in a warm, light place.
- **Lightly** trim/deadhead Hydrangea paniculata
- **Cut** dogwoods back hard, if well established, to encourage vibrant stem colour next winter.
- **Plant** out sweet peas at end of the month.
- **Scatter** hardy annual seed or sow in short drills straight into the border. Cover and water, then thin out as the seedlings get bigger. You'll have masses of colourful flowers in no time.
- **Plant** or pot up tender tubers like dahlias outside now. They're hungry feeders, so use plenty of organic matter, water well and be prepared to fight off the slugs as the shoots emerge. Also put up any rooted dahlia cuttings.
- **Tree** ferns Dicksonia Antarctica have spent the winter bandaged against the cold with thick fleece and hessian. In most winters, the, previous season's fronds are reduced to brown wisps, although some can survive a mild winter. However, now remove them all, dead and alive, cutting them right back. They are soon replaced by new fronds, whose croziers (tight coils) start to appear this month, to then grow and unfurl into their summer magnificence. Tree ferns come from temperate rainforests, so are happiest in light shade with mild weather and lots of moisture. But summer heat and drought can be as damaging as winter cold. They like damp air rather than wet ground, so spray them daily in extreme heat, giving the trunks and aerial roots a good soak.
- **Split** freshly rooted perennials like agapanthus and hostas now. Lift and divide them with a spade or old kitchen knife. Discard the old centre and replant the small clumps.
- **Take** a basal cutting, severing a young shoot from a perennial such as salvia, lupin or phlox. Cut just below ground level and place in a pot of compost.

FRUIT

- **Tender** plants such as bananas, cannas and citrus have spent a long winter in the greenhouse. We can still get frosts but as each day passes that becomes less likely and around the middle of the month get your citrus plants outside to acclimatise and enjoy the air, sun and rain. Lemons and Seville oranges are pretty tough and can take a few degrees of frost but they don't enjoy it, so keep some fleece cut to size and handy to wrap around them if frost is forecast.
- **April** is also the best time to repot citrus. Lift the whole tree carefully from its container and gently remove any loose compost. Trim any roots that are growing up or around the inside of the old pot, and repot into a slightly larger pot, adding plenty of drainage at the bottom. Incorporating some sieved garden soil and garden compost to a proprietary peat-free compost will pay dividends, too. Prune off any damaged or rubbing branches and place the reinvigorated citrus outside in a sheltered sunny spot.
- **It's** time to get spring mulch down around the base of fruit trees and bushes. Mulch keeps weeds down, conserves moisture and improves the soil structure. Remove any weeds, and then soak the ground with plenty of water. Either spread a thick layer of rotted manure or sprinkle a general fertiliser before mulching with less nutritious compost or leafmould.
- **Top** dress containerised fruit, scraping away and discarding the top layer of compost first. Replace this with new compost mixed with a dose of fertiliser, then water so the roots can absorb the nutrients.
- **Last** chance to plant raspberry canes.

- **Tidy** strawberry beds and remove cloches
- **Remove** the shoots of fruit trees sprouting below the point where the variety was grafted on to the rootstock. If these shoots are left, your tree could become overtaken by branches of the rootstock, rather than the fruit variety.
- **Blackcurrant**, hybrid berries and blackberries will appreciate a high nitrogen feed such as sulphate of ammonia now.
- **Protect** plum tree blossom from late frosts.
- **Look** out for black strawberry flowers. Known as strawberry black-eye, this happens when open strawberry flowers get frosted. These flowers will not produce fruits, so in future, protect flowering strawberries from frost.
- **Prune** fig trees, wearing gloves as protection from sap burns.

GREENHOUSE/COLD FRAMES

- **Start** off freshly sown courgettes and pumpkins with heat and protection
- **Shade** young seedlings under glass with newspaper from direct sun between 11am and 3pm.
- **Ventilate** cold frames and greenhouses on sunny days aiming for a maximum temperature of 22°C.
- **Invest**
- **Ensure**
- **Ventilate**

HOUSE PLANTS

- **Remove** dead leaves and give leafy plants a wipe with a damp cloth.
- **Water** plants more as the days get warmer.
- **Water** cacti and succulents, but don't leave them standing in a pool of water.
- **Use** a liquid fertiliser to rejuvenate your plants. Follow the instructions, measuring carefully.
- **Start** propagation by replanting offsets from the base or taking cuttings.
- **When** your amaryllis flowers fade, it's time to focus on next year's flowering. Start by cutting the flower stem. The newly growing leaves need to be retained because they generate energy for the bulb to store for next time. Repot into a slightly larger pot with a loam-based potting compost. Water regularly with a liquid feed. Stop watering in August, and rest the bulb somewhere cool and dark for the leaves to die back. Give it six weeks before placing back into the light and watering again.
- **Grow** cymbidium orchids for a flamboyant display of flowers in winter. Water and feed through the growing season, and keep outside in the shade during summer. September's cooler night temperatures help to ensure flower set. Bring them back in before the first frosts. Cymbidiums are large orchids with arching stems of large flowers in varied colours. The strappy foliage has swollen storage organs (pseudobulbs) at the base. Snip the flower stem right back when it's over. If the plant is filling the pot. knock it out and prepare to repot or divide with several swollen bulb bases in each clump. Knock off the compost and snip out any dead roots. Shorten healthy white roots to 15-20cm to encourage more to grow. You don't need a transparent pot as the roots do well in the dark. Select a new pot 10cm wider than the rootball. Use specialist orchid compost and firm it in.