

Get a head start on spring gardening

Spring is in the air and the busy gardening season is just around the corner. Not only can gardening be personally satisfying, but well-placed trees, shrubs, flowering plants and an attractive lawn can increase the value of your property.

While the earlier you start, the better off you'll be, don't be *too* eager to get things rolling. The ever-changing weather in many Ontario communities can trick even the most experienced gardeners.

One of the key elements in growing luscious vegetables and gorgeous flowers are well-cultivated garden beds, dug several times over in early spring and enriched with nutrients. Success also depends on when you do the digging. Soil should not be worked until the time is right -- that's when all frost is out of the ground and the soil is not at all waterlogged.

To see if the soil is dry enough to work, squeeze a handful into a ball and drop it from shoulder height. If it shatters, the soil is dry enough. If the soil is too dry to form a ball, moisten it before digging. This is also the time to enrich the soil with old leaves, grass clippings, straw, compost, or other forms of organic materials. Garden centres sell alternatives such as peat moss and composted manure. All of these help to retain moisture and retard weed growth, eliminating the need to use chemical fertilizers.

Digging and turning over the first 15 to 20 centimetres of soil in an established garden bed should be fairly easy. The soil should be prepared a few weeks before you plan to start planting so you can remove any weeds that germinate during that time.

By monitoring the soil in your garden beds regularly, you'll be able to dig just as soon as it's ready. While keeping an eye on soil conditions, there are other garden chores to be done. But it's best to wait until the time is right for these as well.

Winter mulch

Be sure the worst frosts have passed before you start to remove old leaves and other materials spread around plants as mulch over the winter. Some experienced gardeners will wait until the tulips show 10 centimetres of growth before removing any mulch.

Since perennials such as tulips and crocuses will be popping up, be gentle when you rake old leaves and clear all leftover debris from fall. Raking too hard or too soon may also destroy the winter homes of good insects, leaving them out in the cold.

Pruning

Early spring is also one of the best times to prune fruit trees and many other deciduous trees and hedges. It's less trauma for them and less leaf raking for you. Proper pruning not only keeps hedges and trees in shape, it also encourages new growth and crop production of fruit-bearing varieties. Coniferous trees and shrubs, however, are best pruned in the fall.

Many trees will also benefit from a fertilizer applied in the form of a tree spike in early spring. These are nailed into the soil at the outer limits around the tree. They're available at garden centres with information on how to apply them.

Lawn care

Early spring is also the time to aerate your lawn if you haven't done so in a few years. The best and easiest way to do this is by renting a gas-powered aerator for half a day and quickly punching plugs out of the soil with it. At greater expense, you can also have a lawn care company come and do it for you.

Aeration removes thousands of soil plugs from your lawn and deposits them on the surface to help break down the thatch layer. The holes allow air, water and fertilizer to penetrate and encourage new and deeper root growth. The soil expands into the holes to make it less compact. All these benefits combine to produce a thicker, greener, healthier lawn.

In early spring, your lawn also needs a good fertilizer, preferably a slow-release one with a high nitrogen content. Be sure to give your lawn a good raking first to get rid of winter's accumulation of leaves and other debris.

Planting

If you're new at gardening, think big but start small. Limit the size of your flower beds and garden to an area you can easily handle. Consider your yard as a cluster of "outdoor" rooms, some for enjoying the sun, others for growing vegetables and others for appreciating the beauty of flowers, shrubs, trees and foliage plants.

If you want continual color or growth from spring through fall, flower and vegetable beds need a lot of thought and planning. You may have to plant more than one kind of annual or vegetable in a particular location to accomplish this. Try to concentrate your garden vegetables in square or rectangular pieces of ground, rather than long rows. This will reduce the amount of time spent weeding and watering.

You'll also have to consider other factors such as sun, shade, heat, reflected light, drainage, winds and soil conditions.

Plan ahead

Garden centres and nurseries get crowded in spring. Be prepared before you get there. Draw up a plan or at least visualize what you want to see in your yard, taking into account all the factors noted above. This will help you determine, well in advance, the types and quantities of plants and shrubs needed to get your yard in gear.