

# Get Ready for Spring

Presented by Suzanne Mahler

152 Brookwood Rd., Hanover, MA 02339; (781) 878-8039  
suznmahler@aol.com (e-mail); suzannemahler.com (website)

## Late Winter/Early Spring

With notebook and camera in hand, stroll through the landscape and critically view and analyze your trees, shrubs, and existing garden forms. Identify trees and shrubs that require pruning, transplanting, or perhaps elimination. List potential modifications for existing beds and identify possible sites for new plantings given unlimited time.

Browse through books, magazines, and catalogs or search the internet for new design concepts and plant combinations. Consider selecting a specific garden theme, research plant material, and make a wish-list of possible acquisitions before the growing season gets underway to avoid impulse buying.

When temperatures are above freezing, apply anti-desiccant and deer repellent sprays to evergreens and other susceptible plants. Monitor late season transplants for heaving and gently press lifted plants back into the soil on warmer days or apply bagged soil or mulch around exposed root systems.

Test flower and vegetable seeds from previous years for viability by placing a few seeds between damp layers of paper towels in a warm location. Purchase new seeds if germination is poor and begin gathering supplies for seed starting. Prepare a timetable for starting your seeds with guidance from the seed packets.

## March/April

Remove soggy debris and branches from gardens from last season, taking care not to tread on water-logged soils. Cut back ornamental grasses. Spread Milorganite to deter deer (also serves as a fertilizer).

Begin pruning trees and shrubs. Acquire quality pruning tools! Bypass pruners (Felco, Corona) and loppers with scissors-like action enable cleaner, closer cuts that facilitate the healing process. Crossed, split, and broken limbs should be a first priority.

Use hand pruners for branches up to ½-inch across, lopping shears for branches up to 2-inches thick, and pruning saws (Silky; Felco) for slightly larger branches and tight places. Bow saws or chain saws may be required for even larger branches. Hedge shears should be used primarily to trim plants into geometric forms and might include yew, hemlock, Japanese holly, boxwood, or privet.

When pruning entire branches from the trunk of a tree, make cuts just beyond the ridge (above the branch) and the collar (a swollen area below the point of the branch's attachment to the trunk). Undercut the branch about ¼ of the way through before sawing through from the top to prevent the bark tearing down the trunk.

To shorten woody stems, always cut back to a bud or branch. On branches where the buds alternate, cut the stem at an angle and cut away from an outward facing bud to encourage growth away from the interior spaces of your shrub or tree unless you are striving to fill a gap. If the plant has opposite buds, cut immediately above a strong pair. Do not leave stubs but do not to prune too closely to a bud or branch.

Prune spring-flowering trees and shrubs shortly after they bloom if you do not wish to sacrifice blossoms, although it is much easier to view the plant's architecture before leaves appear and often worth eliminating some of the fleeting flowers.

Trees and shrubs that bloom in mid-June and after ('Peegee' {Paniculata} and 'Annabelle' {Arborescens} Hydrangeas, butterfly bush, sweet pepperbush (Clethra), and Rose-of-Sharon) can be pruned in early spring since blossoms form on new growth and pruning promotes denser growth and more flowers. Prune roses when buds swell (usually about the time forsythia starts to bloom).

Blue and pink mophead and lacecap hydrangeas (Macrophylla) form their flower buds in late summer at or near the end of the branches and should be pruned as soon as blossoms fade. Substantial fall or spring pruning of the stems will eliminate a majority of the flowers since blossoms form on 'old wood'. Newer cultivars (i.e. 'Endless Summer' and its relatives) often produce blooms on both 'old wood' and 'new wood' but pruning should be kept to a minimum to ensure better bloom.

### April/May

Transplant trees, shrubs, and perennials. Deciduous trees and shrubs should be moved before leaf-break. Soft-barked trees (magnolia, cherry, birch and dogwood), roses and hydrangeas, and broad-leaved evergreens (rhododendron, mountain laurel, andromeda, and holly) fare better if relocated in spring. Soils should be moist but not soggy. Allow at least one foot of root ball for each inch of diameter of the tree's trunk. For perennials, early spring-bloomers are generally best divided and transplanted in autumn and fall-bloomers in spring. Plants that flower in between can usually be split in either season.

When planting trees, shrubs, or perennials, prepare a hole the same depth as the plant was previously growing but 2-3 times wider. Amend soil with organic matter (peat, compost, decomposed manure). Firm soil; water deeply.

For perennials with spreading roots (beebalm, Rudbeckia, Echinacea, tall phlox, yarrow, coreopsis, Shasta daisies, sedums, asters) simply pull segments apart or snip divisions with a clipper.

For tightly knit clumping perennials (daylilies, hosta, Siberian iris) dislodge soil from roots by dropping or shaking clumps to facilitate division. The use of 2 pitchforks, back-to-back, inserted into the center of clumps often helps to begin the division process; screwdrivers, clippers, knives, a Hori Hori, or saws may be necessary. Cut only through the crown of the plant (1-2 inches) and pull or pry divisions apart to minimize root damage. Discard woody centers and weak growth but leave 3-5 fans, eyes, or divisions intact to ensure strong growth and flowering.

Ornamental grasses, especially members of the Miscanthus family, may require an axe or saw to get through the dense, fibrous root systems. Nearly all grasses are best divided or relocated in early spring.

Bearded iris (rhizomes) are best divided and transplanted in August to prevent heaving during the winter months; use a sharp knife or pruning shears to divide and cut away non-productive, diseased, or rotted parts; trim foliage by 1/2. Replant with top of rhizome exposed above the soil.

For peonies, lift roots in late September or early October taking care not to break off red buds (eyes); use a sharp knife or pruning shears to cut roots leaving at least 3 eyes per division. Reset roots with eyes 1-2 inches deep (if planted too deeply, plants will not bloom although it may take a year or two for divided plants to bloom again).