

Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners

By: Jackie Fairbarns, Master Gardener

Of To-do Lists and Healthy Gardening

Here we are, Spring again and what a lovely time to be in central Virginia. I admit, it is not so lovely to be confined at home, either alone or with the rest of the family 24 hours a day. On the bright side, it is a good time to think about, and actually do, some gardening. Fresh air and exercise (with the promise of beautiful flowers or something delicious to eat) are a welcome relief for too much time spent watching the same news over and over, especially when the news seems to suggest that we are all doomed

Earlier this week, on Monday, was Thomas Jefferson's birthday. So this is an appropriate time to remind ourselves that passion for gardening has a long history here in Virginia. For example, Jefferson was noted for his gardens and his collections of plants from around the world. He recognized the value of fresh air, sunshine and good food to mental and physical health. Towards the end of his life, he noted "No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden. Such a variety of subjects, some one always coming to perfection, the failure of one thing repaired by the success of another, and instead of one harvest, a continued one through the year. Under a total want of demand except for our family table, I am still devoted to the garden. But though an old man, I am but a young gardener."

Do you have a to-do list for garden chores? Most gardeners do, whether it is written or carried around in the mind. Now that Spring has truly arrived, it is a good time to revisit the Spring garden to-do list. There is so much distraction in the garden at this time of year. Like Jefferson, we gardeners are delighted by our garden's variety, even as we are vexed by its weeds. If we do not have a list, it is easy to overlook a task that takes little time at the beginning of the season, but will take hours if left to the middle or end of the season. Now is the time to catch up with those things that did not get done back in the fall and winter.

First the catch-up things from the winter list. If you did not order seeds and plants back in January and February, you may find it better to acquire them from a local nursery or garden center. If garden tools need cleaning and sharpening, now is the time to do this.

The early Spring list includes starting perennial and vegetable seeds indoors; removing leaves, twigs and branches from flower and vegetable beds, repairing fences, edging and borders, and removing winter mulch. After removing the winter mulch you will be able to see where the perennials are coming up and determine which ones need to be thinned out, divided or moved to a different spot. Also on the early Spring list of things to do is planting bare root perennials and those grown in containers. Fertilize as needed. Cut back the no longer attractive ornamental grasses. This is also the time to put in stakes or supports for those plants that will grow tall and heavy with flowers, such as gladiolus, dahlias and peonies.

As Spring advances, the to-do list gets longer. Late April and early May are the time to sow perennial flower seeds directly in the garden. Although some of them will not bloom this year, Shasta daisies, Echinacea, black eyed Susan and gaillardia will provide dependable color for many years to come.

Don't forget to deadhead the daffodils. Doing this will encourage the plants to put energy into making bigger bulbs instead of seeds – which means bigger and more daffodils next spring. And please don't cut the foliage until it is turning brown – again to assure blooms next year.

Continuing with the to-do list now is a good time to prune back the spring blooming shrubs, such as forsythia, quince, spirea and lilac. Now is the time also to mulch these shrubs, which will help cut down on the amount of watering you will have to do later in the growing season.

Prepare the beds for summer annuals. Given that we sometimes have frost as late as the end of April (and sometimes even in early May), it is wise to hold off planting tender annuals such as zinnias, marigolds and other summer flowers, as well as tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, cucumbers and melons. Of course, if you have started more of these annuals than you will actually need, you can put some of them in early, and possibly get a head start on the summer season.

About the first week in May, you can feel comfortable about planting seeds of tender annuals directly in the garden. Zinnias, sunflowers, sweet Williams, marigolds, bachelor's buttons are easy to grow and need little care other than occasional watering and cutting off the spent flowers.

An anonymous gardener once observed that "A garden is a thing of beauty and a job forever," so it is unlikely that we will ever get to the end of that to-do list. In fact, being in a war with an enemy we cannot see or shoot at, means it is a real relief to dust off the list and go out and do battle with the weeds and bugs.

Some of you may recall that during World War II, vegetable gardens sprouted wherever there was a patch of dirt and enough sunlight. Even porches, fire escapes and balconies were used to hold miniature vegetable gardens. While we no longer need to support our troops by growing vegetables, Food Banks can use extra vegetables and, as mentioned earlier, growing flowers is good for the soul. In these trying times, we need a different kind of Victory Garden, as we stay home, maintain social distancing and take care of ourselves. If you have youngsters around, let them help plan, plant and care for a special Victory Garden, even if it is no larger than a pot in a sunny spot on the front porch.

If you have children helping in the garden, this is a good time to teach them to recognize those plants that could do them harm. Please teach them not to pick or eat any berries, seeds, leaves or flowers unless they know it is safe to do so. For example, the following plants are toxic and eating any part of them can cause a stomachache or even death. Children are naturally attracted to bright flowers, but should be taught early on not to put them into their mouths. Some to be avoided are Buttercups, Columbines, Daffodils, Foxgloves, Larkspurs, Lilies of the Valley, Sweet peas and Wisteria. Some leaves to be avoided are those of boxwood, cherry laurel, holly, English ivy, pokeweed, potato, rhubarb and tomato. In our area, poison ivy crops up everywhere. Be sure you and your young helpers can identify this plant. For more information about poisonous plant identification and avoidance, contact the Extension Service Office.

Unfortunately, all the Master Gardener activities scheduled for this spring and summer have been cancelled, including the annual plant sale, usually held the first weekend in May. While the Cooperative Extension Office is not closed at present, it is working on a restricted staff schedule. This does not mean that help is not available; just that you may need to consult websites or leave telephone messages so an extension agent or a Master Gardener can call you back. Call the Prince Edward extension office at 392-4246.

We will get through this difficult time together. Meanwhile, fellow gardeners, keep on growing.

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