

THE ARBORETUM AT FLAGSTAFF

Spring Gardening Tips

Early Spring (*March-April*)

Pruning: This is a good time to complete any dormant pruning left over from last fall. Wait until blooming is complete before pruning spring-flowering trees and shrubs. Ideally, prune after the coldest temperatures start rising so that the newly exposed tissues won't freeze and tear and before bud-break so the sap doesn't run from the cut.

Fertilizing: As spring bulbs start to emerge, apply a high-phosphorus fertilizer before it rains so the moisture will carry nutrients to the root zone (or water the fertilizer in).



Starting Seeds: Plan your flower and vegetable gardens so that you can determine when to start seeds indoors for transplanting later. Start cool-weather crops that need 8 weeks or more before transplanting. With Flagstaff's short growing season, starting many crops inside may be the best tactic, aside from plants which like to be directly sown into the ground (gourds, carrots, etc.). Remember to rotate crops from last year's locations to minimize disease and nutrient deficiency problems in the soil. Some organic farmers do a five year crop rotation at minimum.

Maintenance: Caring for tools is always a must and the down time of the colder seasons allows you to keep them like new. Sharpen blades, shovels, hoes, mowers, and other cutting tools. Scrub WD-40 on the metal component of your hand tool using steel wool. Rub linseed oil on wooden handles. Oil moving parts on machinery. Be sure to dispose of the linseed and WD-40 rags properly in a fire-proof container.

Design and Bed Prep: If you are starting seeds indoors or in a greenhouse, prepare sites and check systems. This could be anywhere from drawing plans for a hoop house, a cold frame, or getting a mulch pile ready to spread when the time comes. Tilling is not useful until just before planting. Tilling destroys the beneficial microorganisms that keep a soil healthy. Disturbing the soil will also invite invasives and general weeds to root.

Pest Control: On days warmer than 45 degrees, apply dormant oil spray to control scale insects that can cause significant damage to trees and shrubs later in the growing season. Inspect the bark of willows and aspens in particular for pests. Neem oil is a great insecticide and fungicide for woody and herbaceous plants. At the Horticulture Center, we treat our greenhouse weekly with Neem oil.

Mid-Spring (April-May)



Mulch: Remember the mulch placed over tender perennials last fall? It's time to start removing some of the protective material. The primary benefit of mulch is to keep the ground frozen longer in the spring, preventing the soil from repeatedly freezing and thawing. However, if left on too long after the temperatures begin to rise, it prevents light and air from reaching new buds and slows the warming of soil. Plants may stay dormant longer than necessary and those sensitive to moisture may rot. When really cold nights seem to be over, start pulling the mulch back. Leave some nearby so that if temperatures drop again you can put it back in

place for the night or for when the summer heat sets in. A thin layer of mulch will help the soil retain more moisture, therefore making irrigation less frequent. In the high desert, water conservation is imperative. Research your crops individually to see what soil moisture content they prefer.

Fertilizing: Trees and shrubs are beginning to put on new growth. Fertilize evergreen trees, perennials, and shrubs. If the soil is dry enough to work, you can add organic materials to your garden.

Starting Seeds: Warm weather starts can be sown. For crops like zucchini, plant in a larger, disposable pot. When it comes time to go outside, cut the pot carefully at the edges, making sure not to disturb the root system. Plants like squash do not like having their roots messed with, and if handled with love, the transplant will survive.

If you have space, start some extra warm weather seeds a few weeks after the first batch, in case a late frost nips your plants after you put them in the garden.



Maintenance: If you left dried seed heads on flowers or shrubs last fall, remove them as well as faded spring bulb flowers. Also remove thatch from lawns.

Late Spring (*May*)

Mulch: Remove remaining winter mulch but leave a thin layer around the base of plants to protect them from drying spring winds.

Watering: If spring is dry, be sure to water your plants. Depending on soil type, plants should receive a total of 2 inches of water per month, whether by rain or by water you provide. Occasional deep watering is preferable to frequent, shallow watering. Be especially diligent about watering plants that have been in the ground less than 2 years, as they are still developing root systems.

Another strategy is to plant in a relatively small basin. Planting in a basin allows more surface area for water run off to go directly to the plant.

Planting: Monitor nighttime temperatures to determine when it is warm enough to begin to set out and direct seed the cool-weather crops. Setting the plants out before planting will harden them off, allowing them to better adapt to fluctuating weather patterns that are much different than a greenhouse or home.

Maintenance: Weeds will be starting to grow. Eliminate them early to save time later. The most effective method is to remove roots with your favorite weed-digger. Start using organic-based herbicides that work best on young plants.

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