

MORTIMER GARDENING CLUB

Wild About Gardens Newsletter March 2011

March is here, we can at last feel the warmth of the spring sun which brings us all, gardeners, plants, birds and insects out of hibernation. In my garden the snowdrops are already over but other flowers are quickly filling the gaps. Daffodils are bursting into life, the wallflowers are showing promise of things to come. Forsythia is in bloom and many shrubs have or will soon burst into flower.



Some plants which are at their best in March

- Helleborus Orientalis (Lenten Rose)
- Camellia 'Donation'
- Double Primula (Primrose)
- Corydalis (Pere david)
- Clematis Armandii

Here are some things we can do this month.

- Plant container-grown roses and shrubs into deeply dug and enriched soil, finish pruning and feed Rose bushes.
- Lift and divide congested clumps of Snowdrops while still in leaf, also divide large clumps of hostas, replanting healthy outer portions into prepared soil.
- Lift and divide other herbaceous perennials like rudbeckias, heleniums, golden rod and Michaelmas daisies.
- Prune back autumn flowering Clematis.
- Mulch any areas of garden missed in the autumn
- Cut back Cornus and Salix stems to encourage new growth next year.
- Scrape old surface soil from shrubs in pots and replenish with fresh compost.

- Birds will be busy feeding their nestlings from now on. It's important to put out food for them, but avoid whole peanuts or any other large chunks of food as these present a choking hazard to chicks.

- If you have old twigs or sticks, why not make a mini-log pile. This provides an ideal place for many insects and invertebrates.
- Put in a water butt now, if you don't already have one, to give time to catch the rain before the hotter summer months.

This is the best kind of water to top up a pond with, because it's lower in algae-stimulating nitrogen than tap water. It's also ideal for watering patio pots and borders. By keeping at least some storm water in your garden you're reducing the effects of flash floods which can cause major problems in big cities, particularly London.

Collecting rainwater is easy. Just install a rain diverter and water butt (100-250 litres), propped up on blocks so you can get the watering can underneath. Many local authorities offer cheap water butts, but you can save much larger amounts (650-1250 litres) in the rectangular tanks which are available commercially.

Fruit

- Mulch Raspberry canes with compost or manure
- This is the latest time that bare-root fruit bushes and trees can be planted

Vegetables

- In mild areas plant early crop potatoes and shallots
- Finish digging over ground

Lawns

- Lay new turf when there is no frost

Greenhouse

- Sow seeds of beetroot, leek, lettuce and summer cabbage in a heated greenhouse
- Sow tender annuals in a heated propagator or warm windowsill (not full sun).
- Start Dahlia tubers into growth

General Tasks

- Construct or modify rock gardens
- Keep greenhouse heaters working efficiently
- Re-pot houseplants into bigger pots
- Plant hardy herbs e.g. Mint, Sage, Thyme

If you are interested in incorporating a patch of wildflower into your borders you might find a few ideas below.

- Sunny, sheltered borders attract more bees and butterflies than shady or windy sites.

- Grow a mixture of native and non-native plants, choosing species that flower throughout the year to extend the food chain for as long as possible.
- Planting a group or drift of each plant makes the colour or scent easier to detect. Individual specimens may be difficult for insects to find.

Establishing

- Ask for advice at a local garden centre about which plants will work best. There are also specialist nurseries which supply wildflower seeds and plugs as well as old fashioned varieties of cottage garden plants.

Wildflowers can be incorporated into flower borders and won't look out of place among the more conventional garden flowers. But it might be worth considering a separate wildflower border with cornflowers, scabious, cranesbill, foxgloves, chicory and bellflowers.

- Members of the daisy family are a good choice and buddleia isn't called the butterfly bush for nothing. Teasels work on many levels, being really attractive to pollinating insects while in flower but also providing abundant seedheads for the birds. Although striking in their own right, they can become a bit unruly so a safer option might be the better-behaved globe thistle (*Echinops ritro*)

Night scented flowers like tobacco plants (*Nicotiana sylvestris*, not the cultivated bedding form) and evening primrose are essential for attracting moths.

Maintaining

- If at all possible, avoid chemical fertilisers. Organic options include seaweed derivatives, dried blood, fish and bone meal and pelleted chicken manure. Improve your soil structure by the adding bulky organic material like garden compost, well-rotted animal manures and leaf mould. These can be applied to the soil surface as a mulch or dug in.
- The true wildlife philosophy is to ignore or even encourage pests as they are a source of food for other creatures, and that the garden will find a natural balance. In situations where the balance is not yet evident and the pests seem to be taking over, try using cultural or biological control methods to combat them.



The marmalade hoverfly is one of the first hoverflies of the year. The early emerging individuals are thought to overwinter here. Their numbers are swelled later in the season by migrants from Europe. In late summer the adults may migrate back.

The Song Thrush's song may be repetitive - repeating the same phrase three or four times, as if it liked it the first time and so does it a few more times - but it is clear and flute-like, and is often chosen by people as being their favourite bird song.

They usually sing from a prominent perch.

Robert Browning wrote:

That's the wise thrush; he sings each song
twice over,
Lest you should think he never could
recapture
The first fine careless rapture!

The Song Thrush is smaller than either a Mistle Thrush or Blackbird and is less upright when standing

Unlike the Mistle Thrush, the Song Thrush usually flies low, below tree top height, from bush to bush.



The sexes are similar with warm brown upper parts, pale buff underparts with dark speckles (which look like arrows pointing towards the head and are often arranged in lines) and a tinge of golden brown on the breast. The belly is almost white with fewer, smaller dark spots than the Mistle Thrush. They have relatively large eyes, as do Robins and other woodland ground feeding birds, and pale pink legs. The bill is brown in colour.



The common frog can breathe through its skin. This enables it to hibernate for several months beneath piles of mud and decaying leaves underwater.

Life span

In the wild, the common frog can live for up to 8 years.

Common frog, grass frog Tana temporana

Frogs are mating now and you may hear their calls, or notice two frogs clasped together in your pond. The male is embracing the female and fertilising her eggs as she releases them.

Diet

Common frogs do not feed at all throughout the breeding season, but when they are active they will feed on any moving invertebrates of a suitable size, such as insects, **snails, slugs** and worms, which they catch with their long, sticky tongues. Adult frogs feed entirely on land, whereas younger frogs will also feed in the water. Tadpoles are herbivorous and feed on algae but become carnivores when they mature into adults.

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www.rhs.org.uk

Places to visit:

RHS Great London Plant Fair **29-30th March**. Held at RHS Horticultural Halls, Victoria, London. 0845 612 1253

Malvern Spring Gardening Show **12-15 May**. The Malvern Showground, Worcestershire. Tel. 01684 584 924

Also

RHS Chelsea Flower Show **24-28th May**.

BBC Gardeners' World Live , The NEC, Birmingham **15-19th June**

Hampton Court Palace Flower Show **5-10th July**

To find out more and book visit www.rhs.org.uk/shows or call 0844 338 7526

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