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Make your local landscape lean, clean, pop with green

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



April is the prime time to plant bulbs, such as dahlias, above, amaryllis, gladiolus and lilies, for a big splash of summer color. Beth Schlanker/The Press Democrat.

Spring is here and, as you consider your gardening choices and tasks this month, it's a good time to evaluate your fire risk by thinking lean, clean and green.

Lean landscapes: Plant with appropriate spacing between plants and separate clusters of plants from each other with pathways of noncombustible materials.

Clean landscapes: Remove dried grass, weeds, dead branches and all other dead vegetation. Check gutters, roofs, eaves, vents, chimneys and under decks for leaf and needle litter. Thin and reduce branches from dense tree canopies.

Green landscapes: Keep your plants healthy with proper irrigation and check your irrigation system regularly for leaks or malfunctions. Apply compost and mulches to

help stabilize soil temperature and prevent evaporation, keeping soil moist and healthy.

Planting

The weather is warming and most gardeners are anxious to get outside. In the veggie garden, plant asparagus, peppers, pumpkins, tomatillos, tomatoes, sweet corn, cucumbers and summer squash. Keep in mind that the average last frost date in Sonoma County is April 15 so plant accordingly.

At this point you have a decision to make. Will you plant seeds or seedlings? You might be wondering which method is better for planting annuals and vegetables. An inexpensive way to start annuals and vegetables is to plant seeds in seeding trays indoors to germinate. Moist soil mixed with compost, a warm environment and grow-lighting can improve germination. Begin the germination process early, then plant outside after the danger of frost has passed. Once soils have warmed and are frost free, the seedlings can be transplanted in your garden. The process might be a bit messy but it's fun!

If you're a novice gardener or prefer seedlings, many nurseries will soon be offering a large selection of popular vegetable starts such as tomatoes, peppers, brassicas, squash, beans, herbs and many annuals. Even though the cost of starts might be more expensive than seeds, starts can be planted directly in the ground, thus saving time and providing an instant garden.

When buying seedlings, look for those that are uncrowded and sturdy. Also look for crops and varieties that are labeled "drought-tolerant" or "drought-resistant." Don't be tempted by large flowering plants in small pots. They will likely be root-bound and will have depleted the soil nutrients.

Bulbs

Plant summer bulbs such as gladiolus, dahlia, callas, amaryllis and lilies. Spring-planted bulbs produce some of the most dramatic garden color with minimal effort.

Garden pests

Check often for aphids which flourish on tender new growth in the warmer weather. Remove infestations with insecticidal soap or spray with water from the garden hose as necessary. Avoid using pesticides which may harm bees and other beneficials that feast on aphids, mites, whiteflies and other insects.

If earwigs are gnawing on your plants, trap them with rolled moistened newspaper, bamboo tubes or short pieces of hose. Place these traps on the soil near the affected plants just before dark and shake accumulated earwigs out into a pail of soapy water in the morning.

Codling moth can be a significant pest problem for apple and pear trees. Sanitation should be the first step in any codling moth control program, and it is even more important for those wishing to use primarily nonchemical management approaches.

Every week or two, beginning about six to eight weeks after bloom, check fruit on trees for signs of damage. Remove and destroy any infested fruit showing the frass-filled holes.

Irrigation

As the rains taper off, inspect your irrigation system for cracks, leaks, and clogs. Dirty filters can wreak havoc, especially if you are on a well. Clean out filters and replace them as needed.

Flush out drip systems and make sure all emitters are working. Replace batteries on battery-operated controllers and irrigation timers. Ensure timers are working. Do this now and you will be ready when your plants need water.

As you go about your spring garden tasks, keep in mind the master gardener mantra: **Compost, mulch, weed!**

These actions will help you keep moisture in the soil during our hot dry season. Lightly incorporate 2-4 inches of compost in your soil to retain moisture, improve soil health, and to see higher yields with the same amount of water. Or, you can simply add a 2-inch layer of compost on top of the soil, leaving a gap around the collar/stem of plants to avoid rot. Let irrigation and the macroorganisms move the nutrients into the soil.

Then add 2-4 inches of mulch such as straw, decaying leaves or grass clippings to retain water, cool soil and suppress weeds that compete with desirable plants for water; or layer weeds that have not yet set seeds to compost. Replace path mulches that have been washed away by winter rains and anywhere existing mulch is thin or soil is bare, especially around newly planted trees and shrubs.

Keep mulch back a minimum of three inches from tree trunks and six inches from perennials as too much moisture at the base of woody stems may cause rot.

Contributors to this week's column were Diane Judd and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.