

February gardening tips

Winter's not over yet, and the opportunities to get outside are limited, but here are a few things to do when the rain does stop for a while:

- Winter is a good time for pruning. First cut out dead, diseased and damaged wood. Encourage a good fruit crop by pruning appropriately; consult an illustrated reference book if possible. Shape ornamental trees when they are still young by cutting any shoot growing in the wrong direction back to a well-placed alternative. Avoid blunt-cutting mature branches; the result is always ugly and such treatment damages the health of the tree. Instead, remove an offending branch at its point of origin or cut it back to a suitable side branch.
- Those shrubs which flower in the spring have already formed their flower buds, so are not pruned until the blooms are over. But arch-shaped flowering shrubs such as mock orange (*Philadelphus*) and *Deutzia* which have become too densely overgrown can be rejuvenated by cutting them right back to the ground -- if you are nervous about doing this, or do not want to miss a flowering season, cut out one third of the oldest stems this year, and repeat the procedure next winter. After such a massacre, promote new growth by fertilizing the shrub, and watering it in dry weather.
- Once the worst part of the winter is over, towards the end of February, prune those shrubs which flower on this year's new growth. Roses are a well known example, but also prune buddleja, woody lavatera, hardy fuchsia and late-flowering clematis. Encourage the plants to put on strong new growth by pruning them hard, then fertilize and water well. Recognize the large, flower-promising, buds on hydrangeas, and take care not to remove them all.
- Some ways to reduce pests and diseases use ingenuity rather than chemicals. Draping a large sheet of plastic over peach trees at this time of year shields them from *peach leaf curl* spores which are carried in the winter rain. Apple trees also benefit from being grown under shelter where the spores of *apple scab* will not reach them. Encouraging birds to visit your garden helps to reduce insect pests. Keep the bird-feeder full, and clean out nesting boxes ready for a new brood.
- February is not too early for slugs. Activate an envelope of bakers yeast by mixing it with sugar and water. Pour the resulting liquid into several yoghurt pots and place strategically around the garden. In the morning, bury the dead slugs. Beer works just as well, but what a waste! Even easier to use is Safer's Slug and Snail Bait, (*Ferric phosphate*). Use it instead of the old-fashioned Slug Bait (*Metalddehyde*), which is toxic to pets and other wildlife.
- Do not rush to remove the leaf mulch from tender plants as there may well be more frosts ahead; but clear a space around snowdrops, violets and early irises, and cut the dying leaves from Christmas roses (*Helleborus orientalis*) to expose the emerging flower buds.
- Walk around with a long-handled weed puller, getting rid of dandelions and buttercups. This ingenious tool grabs the root of an offending plant just below soil level, levering it out as you pull the handle. One weed worth bending down for is bittercress with its frilly green rosette of leaves and minute white flowers -- pull it up before it produces hundreds of seeds!
- Our wet climate and acid soil are ideal for moss, but not for lawn grasses. Reducing the soil acidity by applying Dolomite lime, improving the drainage in the mossy area, and thinning out trees to allow more light to reach the lawn are effective ways to help grass overcome moss in their ongoing battle. Better still, create a moss garden!