

March 2009

## Herbaceous Ornamental Plant Tips

### Culture

#### Starting Seeds Indoors

- Many types of annual flower plants can be started indoors this month. Generally, most are started 5-6 weeks before they are planted outdoors. Don't depend on natural sunlight from a window sill to grow your plants. This light is often inconsistent and will produce spindly plants. Instead grow them under cool-white fluorescent lights. The lights should be on for 14-16 hours per day and kept about 2 inches from the top of the young seedlings. Don't over-water, and keep the temperature at 70-75 degrees F. during the day and 65 degrees F. at night. Check seed catalogs or packets to determine the best time to start seeds indoors. Some flowers like begonia, sweet peas, geraniums, and impatiens are slow to develop and need to be started 10-12 weeks before the last expected frost. Others that are fast to germinate like sunflowers and zinnias only require 2-5 weeks.
- **Vines** – Try something new in your landscape this year, consider growing annual vines like cardinal climber, hyacinth bean, morning glory, etc. to cover fences, gazebos and trellises. Check seed catalogs for improved varieties and prepare to start these climbers indoors 6-8 weeks before the last frost, which is around May 10 in Central Maryland.
- **Annuals** - Pansies are now widely available at nurseries and garden centers and can be planted for an early display of color in garden beds. Pansies are a cool weather plant and are dug out and discarded in the compost pile after blooming.

#### Ornamental Grasses and Perennials -

- Cut down perennials and over-wintering ornamental grasses to within 2 inches of the ground and remove leaves and other debris from flower beds. This makes for a much neater appearance when the new growth emerges later this spring.
- Be careful not to set out tender annuals until after the last frost date. This date varies across the state from late April on the Lower Eastern Shore to Late May in Western Maryland.
- **Spring bulbs** - Spring bulbs are emerging and some are flowering at this time. Exposed leaves may be burned later by very cold temperatures but the spring flower display will not be adversely affected.
- Ideally, spring flowering bulbs should be fertilized in the fall with a slow release fertilizer. An NPK of 10-10-10 is especially suitable for tulips and most other bulbs. If you forgot to do so, bulbs may be treated with a fast-release liquid or granular fertilizer in spring when leaves have fully emerged.
- **Flowerbeds** - Clean out flower beds, divide perennials, and top-dress beds with 1 inch of compost. Pull weeds and apply a two-inch layer of mulch to prevent more weeds seeds from germinating.
- **Groundcovers** - Consider planting groundcovers this spring where grass won't grow, where you have heavy shade or tree root problems and on steep slopes. Select plants based on the amount of sun they require. Good choices include periwinkle, liriopse, epimedium, and sweet woodruff. Groundcovers are also useful as a border around buildings and garden beds. However, do not plant these rapid growers near woodlands where they may escape.
- Gently rake out leaves and debris from groundcovers and prune out dead leaves and stems. Fallen tree leaves that pile up and mat around groundcovers can lead to foliar diseases in the spring. Trim back English ivy that is invading walkways, turf and garden beds.

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**Water Gardens**

- Get a head start on your pond chores by cleaning out leaves and debris with a net. This will help reduce problems with algae. The sooner you can do this the better because by April many species of amphibians will lay their eggs and you don't want to disturb them. But if eggs have already been laid you need to be very careful and gentle when cleaning the pond to avoid harming them.

**Have a pest or gardening question?  
Call the Home and Garden Information Center  
800-342-2507  
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