

May in Your Garden:

Spring weather is finally here; spring bulbs are starting to fade. But didn't they look terrific? Take care of your daffodil bulbs, and they will grow and multiply for next spring. Cut off the fading flower, but leave the foliage in place until it turns brown, allowing the plant to put its energy into the bulb. Your reward will be next year, and well worth living with wilted foliage. Once the foliage turns brown, you can dig up the bulbs and divide them or even move them to another spot.

May is an important month to put plenty of mulch around thirsty young shrubs and trees, before they get overheated by the summer sun, or dried out by the wind. First I put down compost, then a thick layer of mini-mulch. Leave an inch of space around the trunk. Garden experts agree that mulching is the most protective method for controlling seasonal heat and improving the health of plants and soil. Mulching reduces the time spent on weeding and cultivating. Mulching keeps plants cool and encourages worms and other organisms that improve the health of your soil. Certain plants thrive in different kinds of mulch. For instance, camellias and azaleas need an acid environment to perform at their best. Either pine needles, oak leaves, or peat moss works better for these acid loving plants.

May is also a good time to plant dahlias. Find a sunny spot, dig a hole about five inches deep, throw in a handful of bone meal and cover that with a handful of soil. Lay the tuber on its side in the hole, put a stake in at one end of the tuber, and close up the hole. Before you go away, put out some snail and earwig bait. They love those tasty little dahlia shoots. Dahlias grow a huge amount from a small tuber, so reward them with some all-purpose plant food.

How are your roses doing? So far, mine are happy and racing to be the first to open. Unfortunately, I have found rust pustules on some leaves. Those leaves get stripped off and thrown in the garbage. I also called on my friends the ladybugs to work on the new aphids that I saw lurking about. I just bought a few hundred of them at the hardware store, and set them loose last night in the dark. Hopefully they will hang around and enjoy a snack of aphids. Last year, when rust became epidemic on my roses, I used a modified Cornell University Formula, at least as effective as a chemical fungicide: 2 T. horticultural oil, 1 T. mild non-detergent liquid soap, 1 T. fish emulsion, 5-7 drops of a liquid plant vitamin mixture. Mix in 1 gallon of water. Spray liberally. This spray is also good for powdery mildew on roses, squash, dahlias.

And now on to my favorite topic: summer vegetables, especially tomatoes. Last month I got my wine barrels ready for tomatoes, by moving out some of the old soil and replacing it with my home-made compost and chicken manure. So now that it is past May 1, my target date for planting tomatoes, I am eager to start the planting process. Many years ago I took a tomato class from the owner of Love Apple Farm. So into the hole for each tomato goes the following: 1 fish head, acquired from Cook's Seafood and stored in the freezer until planting time; 2 handfuls of bone meal, 1 handful of worm castings, 2 handfuls of compost, 3 egg shells, collected all winter; 2 aspirin. I only grow Indeterminate tomatoes, which continue to grow until they freeze over. (Read each label closely. Somewhere on it each tomato is labeled Indeterminate or Determinate) My favorite tomatoes are Sungold cherry, Black Krim, and Mortgage Lifter. I always grow the old faithful Early Girl and Better Boy.

I also make room for 3 or 4 cucumber plants, which I grow in a short tomato cages or trellises so they can hang and not get too curly. This year I have made a teepee of string beans as a hide out for my grandsons. I am growing Blue Lake beans and purple long greens. The vegetable raised beds will be taken over by eggplants, zucchini, crook neck squash, and red bell peppers. To treat my vegetables well, I make sure that they never get dehydrated from lack of water. If you don't have room for any veggies, think about a "patio" variety that can grow in a 14 inch diameter pot. I saw Patio Cherry tomatoes, and Patio Zucchini during a recent drive-by at several nurseries. So get growing! Nothing beats a home-grown tomato!

— Vicki Sullivan