



February in the Garden

Many of us gardeners have spent more time than usual in January, pruning and weeding our gardens.

Hopefully winter chores in the garden are near completion, especially chores to be done while plants are dormant: transplanting, spraying with dormant spray, pruning.

February is also the perfect time to beef up the soil in our garden, a most important job. Now is the time to really add compost (just an inch or 2) and mulch, before the soil warms up, the weeds flourish, and the clay soil gets harder.

Ten years ago, my soil was grey clay. Then I retired from teaching and became a 4-season gardener. I have been using my own compost for ten years, just enough to cover my soil twice a year with about an inch or so, followed by Ciardella's mini mulch. I took a class on compost and realized how easy it is. **If you don't make your own compost, then put on your mask, drive to Summer Winds,** and buy a sack of compost and a bag of mini-chip mulch. Your garden will thank you as your plants start looking perkier and laden with blossoms.

Those of you who have roses, walk around and inspect them. We all know what teenage pimples look like. Check out the branches coming off the main canes. See any pimples? Hopefully those will be new stems and blossoms. Also, make a trough around your rose bush, add some compost or use some of the leaves you pulled out from around the yard, but do not feed the rose until the night time temperature warms up to 60 degrees, hopefully in March. I spent time in January stripping the leaves off my roses to encourage them to go dormant. Plus, it is easier to see the shape of a naked rose bush to prune below doglegs on the side branches. I am careful to collect all around my roses any dropped rose leaves and throw them in the city bin so that the soil around the roses stays healthy. I make sure to apply a little extra compost to each rose after pruning; it's like giving them a snack until it warms up enough to feed them. By the way, next to almost every climbing rose I grow a Clematis. Clematis are very well behaved and happily intertwine with the roses. I cut them back to 5 inches above the soil every year when I prune my roses, or the month before if the Clematis run out of energy.

How did your Camellias do this winter, or are they about to flower in February? It wouldn't hurt to feed them some acid fertilizer to encourage their blossoms. I also knock off double buds about to bloom, giving more space to a single bloom. Otherwise, twin blossoms duke it out, shortening the blossom time of both. Reward those hardworking Camellias with another dose of acid fertilizer when they finish blooming. That is also the best time to prune lightly to maintain the shape of the shrub.



Many years ago, an indoor gardener urged everyone to give houseplants a break – no feeding them between Thanksgiving and Valentine's Day. So I will ramp up feeding my wonderful ficus plants on Valentine's Day after they have old roots trimmed, get new SuperSoil, and a diluted milk bath to clean their leaves. For the first time in years, I had violets blooming in the kitchen! I did give them a rest after Thanksgiving, but I am eager to start feeding them again to prove it was not a fluke that they rebloomed last year.

For the first time ever, I actually dug up all of my dahlias, covered them with peat moss and stored them in the garage. I took a peek at them the middle of January, and they were still tucked in. Sharleen Fiddaman keeps dahlias hunkered down until Mother's Day, so there is no rush to plant them back in the soil.

How brave are you about dividing perennials? Since we are all sheltering in place and not out and about socializing, February is the perfect time to multiply Primroses, Salvias, and the very easiest, dwarf Agapanthus. For dwarf Agapanthus, I dig around the whole plant, pull it out and put it on a tarp. Then I take a shovel, divide it into 4 clumps, then pull apart the clumps. I pot those clumps in gallon containers and spread the wealth to neighbors and friends. This year I will work on daintier plants, like Primroses and Rudbeckia, just to learn by doing! If you know perennials that you have found to be easy to divide, please let me know.



February is when I spruce up my butterfly garden, fluffing up or adding more of my most productive perennials, which are nectar plants: Coreopsis, Echinacea, Salvia, Lantana. Butterflies have poor vision, so they fly around looking for bright orange, red, purple flowers. I also have been growing startups of Narrow Leaf Milkweed, the preferred egg laying plants of Monarch butterflies. I have two butterfly gardens, one in a sunny spot in the back yard, and another in the full sun parking strip along the sidewalk in front of my house. Every year I find at least one Monarch caterpillar, and sometimes two or

three, developing from eggs laid on the Milkweed.

Throughout the year I have been growing lettuce varieties in my window boxes outside the kitchen. However, this winter I was tormented by squirrels who trampled the bits of lettuce they left behind. After all my usual methods failed to stop the little varmints, I threw in the spade, planted Geraniums in the boxes and resorted to store-bought lettuce. I tried to sneak in some lettuce startups in between the Geraniums but the squirrels found those too.

Enjoy your garden!

How lucky we are to have no snow on the ground, Camellias blooming all overtown, and roses eager to grow!

Happy Gardening,

Vicki Sullivan
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