

MARCH

Expect extreme weather. This is the month for clearing the ravages of winter, tidying the garden, and putting in place the structural work that will make your gardening life easier and cheaper.

First, satisfy yourself that the soil is workable and warmed up to about 15 degrees centigrade. Consider laying and pinning horticultural fleece. If the weeds are showing, you can be digging!

SOW Under cover - greenhouse, cold frame, window sill: tomatoes, early cabbage, peas, leeks, beetroot, beans, chard, leeks. Seeds of hardy annuals of flowers and herbs.

To save space in the greenhouse (at a premium now), grow cuttings for the garden in SMALL pots. Feed the young plants to avoid starvation; move to frost-free cold frame when the weather is warm enough, being careful not to overcrowd the pots so air can circulate freely.

PLANT Onions and shallots if you can manage to dig the soil and it's warm enough.

PRUNE Ornamental grasses by reducing root mass – pot on to give to friends. Fuchsia, Buddlejia Davidii, lavender, clematis Group 3. Reduce lower stems of bamboos, trimming any flowering/growth to good height to expose the stems.

FEED Roses, with slow-release granules. Take this opportunity to remove weak and crossing growth.

INSTALL A water butt, or several, making sure they are elevated enough to get the watering can under the tap on the butt. Water diverting kits are available from most large hardware stores.

Buy or create a compost bin, positioning it in the most convenient location.

These two projects provide you with free water and free compost; also good for the environment. What's not to love? (See the articles on WATER BUTTS and COMPOST MAKING in MONDAY NIGHT MUSINGS on this website.)

CUTTINGS Take softwood cuttings, a good way of having free plants for your borders - clematis, forsythia, fuchsia, pelargoniums, salvias. Cut a stem off below third or fourth pairs of leaves. Pull off the bottom pair and trim end of stem with a sharp knife. Dip in rooting powder – not essential but all help gratefully received. Insert stems around the edge of a pot so that leaves DO NOT touch. Water and place in a propagator OR enclose pot in a plastic bag secured with twist-tie or elastic band making sure the leaves do NOT touch bag. High humidity is important.

This is only one form of taking cuttings. Leaf cuttings should also be taken at this of year. This method is good for houseplants such as Streptocarpus Saintpaulia. Select a leaf and cut off cleanly from the base. Trim stalk about 3cm below leaf blade. Insert in soil so contact is just in the cutting mix in an individual pot or, a larger pot if several leaf cuttings. Treat then as above. Pot up once they are growing vigorously.

Streptocarpus can also be propagated from leaf sections. Choose a healthy, mature leaf. Cut the leaf into slices 5-7 cm wide across the spine, purposely ensuring that the cut side nearest the leaf stalk forms the base, and bury the base one third in the potting mix. Place in good light but not direct sunlight, and pot up when ready.

MAINTENANCE

- Position plant supports; edge lawns, mulch borders, weed,

JUNIORS' JOBS FOR MARCH

Now's the month you can plant **tomato seeds**! There are so many different seeds you can choose, so take a trip to a garden centre and look at the varieties on offer – there will be different colours and assorted sizes from cherry-size tomatoes to large beefsteak ones as big as your hand! You will need a warm, light place to put them to germinate but not in full sun or they will dry out.

Decide if you'd like them to grow as small bushes or whether you want to grow them up a cane – like Jack did to the beanstalk! The seed packet will tell you which ones you are buying.

Put peat-free seed compost in a seed tray. Pat it down, but not too hard, and then put the seeds individually on the surface of the soil. Cover lightly with compost – if you have a sieve, put some compost into it and shake it to cover the seeds lightly, so they are just buried. This helps remove big bits of compost so the little seeds can push through more easily. Put a small amount of water in a flat container or in a sink, and then put the seed tray in so it can soak up the water. If you water from the top, you may well wash your seeds to one end of the seed tray – not what you want!

Keep watching them, watering gently as they grow, and after they are large enough to handle – about 3-4cm high - GENTLY tease them out and plant them individually into small pots of peat-free compost. When they grow to fill that pot, plant them individually into a large pot, a growbag that takes up to three plants, or into the garden (but only after the end of May to avoid frosts). Make sure you feed them regularly after the second bunch or truss has appeared and keep watering!



If you meant to do this task this month but forgot, don't worry. Next month or even in May, take a very ripe tomato, half-fill a pot with compost, put the tomato in the pot and top it up with more compost so the tomato is buried. Water it, keep the pot in a warm place and, after a few weeks, tomato seedlings will grow for you to plant out. Simple!

