

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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IN MY GARDEN

Now that winter is almost over it is time to start gardening outdoors again. We will certainly get more snow, and we have months before we pass our average frost-free date, but nonetheless there are tasks that can be performed now. April and May are very busy months, so anything accomplished now is a bonus.

March is time to cut down ornamental grasses and prune fruiting trees and shrubs. Grasses provided form and movement in the winter garden, but now start to shed. Cut them a few inches above the soil line with a pruning saw. Make sure temperatures are above freezing when pruning trees and shrubs to avoid doing damage to the remaining branches.

This is a great time to begin treating fruit trees for disease with dormant oil or a lime-sulfur spray. These reduce the pathogens that may have overwintered on the plant, and provide a barrier against infection. As with pruning, don't apply these products unless temperatures will be above freezing until the spray has dried thoroughly.

One task to avoid this time of year is working the soil. Clay soil forms into hard clods if it is worked when it is wet. Use the squeeze test to check the moisture level – if a clump of soil squeezed in the palm of your hand remains in a firm wad, the soil is too wet. Don't till the soil until the lump breaks apart once it is released.



March 1st marks the first time the doors open to the public at the brand new Petitti Garden Center in Avon, Ohio. This spectacular \$7 million facility features one quarter of a million square feet of covered shopping space, and North America's first Thermoflor glass structure enclosing a 50 foot wide, 420 foot long arcade. Built on the site of the Good Times amusement park at 33777 Chester Road, the garden center is visible from Interstate 90 and convenient to the Route 83 exit.

This garden center has drawn international attention for its operations as well as its architecture. Petitti Garden Centers was recently named National Revolutionary Retailer of 2007 by Today's Garden Center magazine for its emphasis on training and technology in plant production and retailing. Stop in for a preview, and then come back for the Grand Opening on Saturday, April 14th, 2007.

FEATURED BULB

CROCUS

As our winter snow cover recedes, the earliest spring bulbs emerge. The most appreciated of these is the crocus.



Crocus "Blue Pearl"

Crocuses actually grow from corms, not bulbs. Like bulbs, corms are swollen stem bases that store nutrients. Unlike bulbs, corms live only one year, and then they are replaced by a new corm that grows on top of the old one. Why don't crocuses eventually pop right out of the ground? It seems that the roots from the new corm grow downward and contract, actually dragging the new corm down into the soil so that it remains at the same depth.

Crocuses come in various tones of white, yellow, purple and lavender. They are seldom if ever bothered by animals, so deer, rabbits, mice, voles, and other critters are not problems. Crocuses will readily multiply when they are grown in suitable conditions, making them long-lasting features of the garden. All they require is well-drained soil and some sun in March and April when the trees are bare of leaves. Plant crocus corms about three

inches below the soil surface. It is best to plant them in clusters – rows of single flowers can look unnatural, and seldom produces an impressive display of color.

It was once common practice to plant crocuses in the lawn, resulting in swaths of color all over the spring landscape. Modern lawn care techniques have discouraged this practice, but many gardeners still want to give it a try. Avoid mowing the lawn until the crocus leaves have begun to shrivel and brown on their own. This may result in a shaggy lawn during the first part of April, but it ensures that the leaves will produce plenty of energy to store in the new corm for next year's blooms. Do not use any weed killers on the lawn until the crocus leaves are completely gone. If you are successful, the spring lawn will burst into color each March, and as the crocuses multiply, the display will become grander with each passing year.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

FRUIT TREE CARE

Fruit-bearing trees have been associated with gardens since Eden. It was important to protect these trees and their bounty from wild animals and passing strangers. When food was hard to get, people didn't flinch at blemished fruit that may or may not have a few insects in it. Backyard fruit trees today face higher standards set by grocery stores and commercial growers, who routinely produce perfect fruits for our table. The home gardener may not want to be so reliant on pesticides, but keeping fruits relatively pest-free takes some effort.

If you are buying fruit trees, it pays off hundredfold in time and money to get the most disease-resistant trees you can find.

Scab is a common disease of apples, pears and peaches, causing brown, corky lesions on the surface of the leaves and fruit. Fungal spores spend the winter on fallen leaves on the ground, and spring rains splash the spores into the air to restart the infection cycle. Besides selecting resistant trees, the most important way to prevent this disease is good sanitation: remove all leaves and fallen fruit in late autumn. Apply a lime-sulfur spray with horticultural oil to the trunk and branches in March, well before buds have begun to open, to destroy any remaining spores and to smother overwintering insects. This treatment is

Some Disease-Resistant Fruit Trees		
<u>Apple</u>		
Freedom	Jonafree	Jonathan
<u>Cherries</u>		
Meteor	Montmorency	North Star
<u>Pears</u>		
Kieffer	Moonglow	Orient
<u>Peach</u>		
Elberta	Junegold	Red Haven

generally considered organic, but must be done while the buds are tightly closed, as the lime and sulfur will burn leaf tissue.

Some gardeners will want to use a fruit tree spray throughout the growing season to provide continued control of insects and diseases. Fruit tree sprays can be used after the buds have begun to open. Neem oil is considered organic and provides protection against bugs and fungus, or a conventional spray may be used.

Timing of the spray is critical. Different pests infest the tree at specific times. Some types of fruit trees produce blooms before leaves, while apples produce leaves first. The green tip stage occurs only on apples, when the green tips of leaves

begin to peek out of buds. Pre-bloom stage is when flower buds swell but before flower color is showing. Full pink (or white) occurs soon after, when the buds are still closed but the flower color is apparent. Spray at each of these stages.

Do not spray when the tree is in bloom! Bees and other pollinators may be harmed by chemicals at this time, preventing fertilization of the flowers and good crop production. The spray may also cause the flower to fall prematurely, resulting in little or no fruit that year.

Spraying resumes at petal fall, when the flowers begin to drop off the tree. Spray again at first cover, when the leaf buds have opened and grown into fully-formed leaves. As branch tips grow, a new group of leaves will be produced, called the second cover. These leaves will need protection from another spraying.

Rain and moisture not only encourages disease, but also tends to wash off treatments. Additional sprays may be required to provide adequate protection. Stop spraying trees at least three weeks before harvest. It should now be clear to you why selecting disease-resistant fruit tree varieties is so important.

Most fruit trees will set far more fruit than the tree can bear. Do not be alarmed if a substantial proportion of small fruits begin to drop off the tree. This is part of the natural thinning process, and may also occur if the flowers were not adequately pollinated. Once fruit drop slows, it is wise to thin the fruits even further, so that there is only one developing fruit every six to eight inches along each branch. This will allow the remaining fruit to grow to full size and develop maximum sweetness and flavor. Trees that are not thinned generally produce small, poor quality fruit, but may

also become so heavy that branches break under the weight of the fruit. It may also cause the tree to bear fruit in alternate years because the nutrient reserves have been so severely depleted.

Pruning fruit trees is very difficult to describe, and is best learned by demonstration and practice under trained supervision. Nevertheless, there are a few tips that are helpful to beginners. Any time of year is fine for pruning out the three Ds: dead, damaged and diseased branches. Live branches should only be cut in late winter or early spring, before growth begins but after severe cold is over. Select the strongest branches that are widely and evenly spaced, and completely remove the weak, spindly branches. This especially applies to watersprouts, which are thin stems that rise straight up with few or no branches out of larger, horizontal limbs. If branches rub against each other, remove the thinner, weaker branch. By all means, leave the short little twigs that come off the sides of limbs and branches. These are the fruiting spurs, and produce the highest density of flowers and fruits.

All these steps are not necessary to have success in home fruit trees. Resistant varieties may require no spraying for good quality fruit, and many people are willing to live with a few blemishes in order to enjoy chemical-free food grown locally. Other gardeners do not worry about getting the maximum crop, but get pleasure from the ornamental value of the trees, with a few fruits as a bonus. In any case, fruit trees

continue to be valued members of the garden today as through history.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- Set clocks one hour ahead on Sunday, March 11 for Daylight Savings Time.
- Start celery, onions, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and other cole crop seeds indoors.
- Don't work soil when it is wet enough to clump in your fist. This will form hard clods and ruin soil texture. Wait until soil crumbles after squeezing.
- Scout the landscape for bagworm cases. Hand pick and destroy them before eggs can hatch.
- Fertilize trees and shrubs with fertilizer spikes or an organic granular fertilizer.
- Spray trees and shrubs with horticultural oil to kill over-wintering pests when temperatures are over 40 degrees.
- Prune fruit trees, grapes, berries and summer-flowering shrubs early in March when temperatures are above freezing.
- Prune roses to about a foot high, removing any winter-damaged canes.
- Cut back ornamental grasses to a few inches above soil level before new growth starts.
- Food for birds is scarcest now - keep feeding them! Oil sunflower, nyjer and suet are high-energy foods.
- Re-pot houseplants as the day length increases and growth begins again. Clean the pot thoroughly and use new, sterile potting soil.



ROGER S. BOLGER HAS OVER TEN YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL HORTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND HAS GARDENED ALL HIS LIFE IN NORTHEAST OHIO. HE HAS GIVEN DOZENS OF GARDENING TALKS AND SPECIALIZES IN WOODY PLANTS, PERENNIALS, TURF, ENTOMOLOGY, INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT, ORGANIC GARDENING, PONDS AND BACKYARD WILDLIFE.

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