

# Around the Yard

by Reeve Hobbie, Master Gardener

Crazy winter! We had some 70 and 80 degree days in January and a number of freezes in February. Our outdoor plants are totally confused.

March and April has to be warmer than February and our yards be telling us that spring is really upon us, so let me suggest what to do and what not to do. I hope you will find this helpful.

## MARCH

### **Do...**

- + bag up or put into compost the live oak leaves that now cover your yard so that your lawn has a chance to green up.
- + begin lawn mowing. It might be a good idea to get that straw-like thatch off the lawn by mowing it closer to the ground the first round or two. Add that thatch to your compost pile.
- + start watering your lawn and gardens regularly and in accordance with City of Austin guidelines.
- + prepare soil for new garden beds or those needing rejuvenation. Add compost and other nutrients and work that into the soil. It's more important to feed soil than to feed plants.
- + plant new trees and shrubs now to give them a good start before it gets too hot. This is just about the last chance to do so until late next fall.
- + trim back your evergreen shrubs, hedges and ground cover. I've already whacked most of mine back by one third!
- + fertilize fruit trees, nut trees, and rose bushes using a 3-1-2 ratio fertilizer. Continue fertilizing roses every 4 to 6 weeks. Rose bushes will grow in the shade, but won't bloom well unless they get at least 6 hours of direct sunlight per day. Last chance to move rose bushes if you must.

- + prune hibiscus this month and begin feeding them.
- + divide fall-blooming perennials (mums, fall asters, Mexican bush sage, etc.).
- + begin planting warm-season vegetables (green beans, tomatoes, peppers, squash).

## Don't...

- **prune any kind of oak tree. PERIOD!** To help prevent the dreaded oak wilt you must now wait until the hottest days of summer (after July 1). (Read Nancy Shindler's article on oak wilt in the February *Balcones Living* magazine.)
- fertilize your lawn just yet. You must let it green up naturally. That spring application of fertilizer should not go down on your lawn until mid April.
- apply a pre-emergent weed killer to your lawn. It's already too late (see February).
- prune shrubs that are about to bloom (azaleas, quince, mountain laurel, fringe flower, etc.). Shape them later after they have bloomed.
- pull out what appears to be dead perennials and shrubs. Despite our crazy winter please be patient for spring to completely arrive before deciding on the fate of your winter-struck plants.
- remove the foliage from spring-flowering bulbs after they have bloomed. Wait until they completely brown out and the dead foliage wants to fall off.

## APRIL

### Do...

- + fertilize your lawn on or about mid-month (Income Tax Filing Day) using a 3-1-2 ratio fertilizer and follow manufacturer's directions for the correct spreader setting.
- + apply a good 3- to 4-inch layer of mulch to all your beds. There are so many benefits: water retention, weed control, plant root insulation, organic matter, and overall beautification.
- + lightly prune crape myrtles if you haven't done so already. Only deadhead last year's seedpods with small clippers. Bring out the saw or loppers only if you need to

remove a complete branch or trunk near the base. Fertilize your crape myrtles with a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 ratio fertilizer.

- + fertilize your spring-flowering shrubs soon after blooming. It's also a good time to shape those shrubs, but avoid excessive cut backs.
- + apply bone meal around your now spent spring flowering bulbs. Work it into the soil.
- + plant warm-season vegetables – sweet potatoes, melons – just to name a couple.
- + begin planting summer annuals. For some flowers, it may still be too early. Availability of an item in a store does not always mean that it is the proper time to plant it. Hold off on planting impatiens, coleus, begonias, pentas and the like until next month when the soil is warmer.
- + watch for insect pests. The presence of pests doesn't always warrant a spray.
- + remove plants you have determined to have died this past winter. If they haven't sprouted up new growth from their roots or leafed out by now, they probably won't.

## Don't...

- **prune oak trees. PERIOD!**
- commit “crape murder,” the bad pruning of your want-to-be tall crape myrtles. Tall varieties can't be made into dwarfs.
- plant caladium tubers just yet. They need soil temperatures to be at least 70 degrees for best growth. Buy the tubers now, but wait to plant them next month.
- plant sun-loving annuals and perennials in dense shade. Don't plant shade-loving plants in full sun.
- keep scalping your lawn. Low cutting time is over. For St. Augustine grass, raise the blade to a very high setting (up to 3 or 4 inches in dense shade).
- bag lawn clippings. Let mowed grass fall back into the lawn where its nutrients will benefit the soil.

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If you have questions about your yard or garden, please call Travis County Master Gardeners at 512-854-9600. The person at the other end of the line may not have an immediate answer, but they'll research it and will get back with you.

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