



## “From the Potting Shed”

Riverview Garden Club - Helpful Hints  
March 2023

Old Man Winter decided to stay around a bit longer and sent us a last-minute snowfall in February! The blanket of snow will keep our spring bulbs warm and soon they'll wake up and peek their heads out from under winter's covers. As we eagerly await the arrival of spring, here are some garden chores and activities to help you plan ahead.

### *Things to do this month...*

#### **Spring Garden Maintenance**

- Take a soil sample and bring it to your local county extension office for a soil test before planting time arrives.
  1. Cooperative Extension of Passaic County, Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, 1310 Route 23 North Wayne, NJ 07470, (973-305-5740)  
Rutgers Master Gardeners of Passaic County Helpline (973-305-5743)
  2. Cooperative Extension of Morris County, Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, County Building 550, West Hanover Avenue, Morristown, NJ  
Rutgers Master Gardeners of Morris County Helpline (973-285-8305)
- Avoid walking in your garden when the soil is saturated. Compressing the soil with weight will result in soil compaction, leading to problems in the garden bed.
- Pull up any weeds before they get established in the garden bed.
- Control weeds in early spring by adding a couple of inches of mulch to your garden beds.
- Once your soil test results are in, add well-decomposed compost and any other recommended amendments to help build healthier soil. These actions will bolster your soil and prevent a lot of propagating spring weeds from overtaking your garden before your gardens are in full swing.

#### **Pruning Trees and Shrubs After Winter** - March is an excellent time for late winter pruning!

- Prune away branches that have suffered winter damage.
- Prune grapevines and fruit trees.
- Do a hard pruning of dormant woody perennials and dormant ornamental grasses. You can be aggressive about your pruning with these dormant plants and only leave the first bud at the plant's base. This applies only to plants that produce blooms on new stems.
- Avoid pruning flowering perennial shrubs that have already set their buds for the new season (forsythia, azalea, rhododendron, hydrangea macrophylla, lilac, viburnum, weigela, etc.) otherwise, you risk cutting away their blooming potential.

- If your plantings are purely for greenery and privacy, you may trim the bushes' tips to shape them; Boxwoods are an example of these green shrubs.

## Spring Garden Planning

There are still many chilly and rainy days ahead in Zone 6 so you can keep working on your garden planning. Keep your garden journal handy!

- Attend a Horticulture Show for inspiration!
- Check out some new gardening magazines and books.
- Search your favorite gardening websites for ideas and tips.
- Use your sketched-out garden design plans and dream boards to figure out where your future plants and seedlings will go.
- If pests or diseases were a problem for you last season, it's a great time to research companion plants and spacing provisions to protect and boost your plants' productivity.
- Decide what you still need to fill unoccupied spaces in your garden beds before it is time to buy them.
- Use your vegetable garden planting charts to guide you on what to plant and when, so you will be ready for planting when warmer temperatures roll in.
- Construct your new raised beds, trellises, and other garden structures indoors for later placement in the garden.

## Assess Garden Tools and Supplies - Spring will be here before you know it!

- If you haven't done so already, be sure that you assess your tools for sharpening and cleaning needs.
- The lawnmower should receive a fluid change as well. It's best to get all of your gardening supplies in tip-top shape so that when spring rolls in, you are fully prepared for yard and garden work, so you do not have any setbacks.
- Check your tools for disrepair signs, tune-up and thoroughly clean and sanitize, sharpen blades, and oil up moving parts. It is also essential to keep your garden free from diseases that may have been a problem in your garden last season.
- Start by using steel wool or a metal grill brush to clean any debris off your garden tools. Wipe surfaces with a damp rag. Use coarse sandpaper to scuff away any signs of rust on metal surfaces. Dab vegetable oil onto a rag and wipe metal surfaces. Use a piece of sandpaper to slough away any rough or splintering spots on wooden handles. Wipe wooden handles down with a rag wet with linseed oil.

## Indoor Seed Starting

Before starting seeds indoors it's important to identify your planting zone's last frost date. Go to <https://www.plantmaps.com/interactive-new-jersey-last-frost-date-map.php>

The last frost date is essential because this is how you will calculate what you can start planting indoors by counting the seed maturation days backward from the last estimated frost date so transplants will be ready for outdoor planting.

You can begin planting warm-season crops indoors in early March. These include, but are not limited to:

Squash  
Peppers  
Tomatoes  
Eggplant  
Lettuce

Flower seeds with long maturation periods like coneflower and rudbeckia can also be germinated in seed trays and pots indoors throughout the month as well. Remember to stagger your plantings with new plants every two weeks to prolong your harvest!

### Force Branches Indoors

Consider pruning a few branches from some flowering shrubs and trees to bring a breadth of spring into your home!

Make a clean cut and arrange the branches in a vase of clean water to force an early bloom. The following make great branch sources: Forsythia, Dogwood, Flowering Cherry or Pear Trees, Magnolia, Pussy willow, Flowering Fruit Trees

Eager to start your seeds?

Try this technique for “Winter Sowing” from **Gardening Know How**.



### **Milk Jug Winter Sowing: How to Start Seeds in A Milk Jug**

For gardeners, spring can't come soon enough and many of us have been guilty of jumping the gun and starting our seeds way too early inside. A terrific method for starting seeds that can be done earlier is **milk jug winter sowing**, which is basically sowing seeds in a milk jug that becomes a mini greenhouse. Keep reading to learn about milk jug seed pots.

### **About Sowing Seeds in a Milk Jug**

Sure, you can recycle plastic milk jugs, but a better use for them is to repurpose them for milk jug winter sowing. This is a low-maintenance way to start seeds earlier than you thought possible. The sealed jug acts as a greenhouse that allows the seeds to germinate several weeks ahead of direct sowing.

The plants are sown in their mini greenhouse outside, eliminating the need to harden off seedlings. The seeds also go through a period of stratification which is necessary for some types of seeds to germinate.

### **How to Make Milk Jug Seed Pots**

Milk jugs are usually the preferred vehicle for this type of sowing, but you may also use any semi-transparent plastic container (apparently the semi-opaque milk containers work as well) that has room for at least 2 inches (5 cm.) of soil and at least 4 inches (10 cm.) for growth.

Some other ideas are juice jugs, strawberry containers, and even rotisserie chicken containers. Rinse out the milk jug and punch four drainage holes into the bottom. Cut the milk jug horizontally at the bottom of the handle working your way around the circumference; leave an inch (2.5 cm.) or so to act as a hinge at the handle.

### **How to Sow Seeds in a Milk Jug**

Use either a soilless seed starting mix or a potting mix that has been sifted to remove any large chunks of bark, twigs, or rocks and has been amended with perlite, vermiculite, or, ideally, sphagnum moss. If using a potting mix, make sure it has no fertilizer which can burn the seedlings. The most ideal seed starting medium for milk jug winter sowing is 4 parts screened aged compost to 2 parts perlite or vermiculite, and 2 parts peat moss.

Fill the bottom of the jug with 2 inches of slightly damp medium. Plant the seeds according to the package instructions. Replace the top of the milk jug and seal it as best you can with tape; packing tape works best. Place the containers in an area of sun outdoors.

Keep an eye on the containers. If temperatures dip, you may want to cover the jugs with a blanket at night. Water the seedlings lightly if they dry out. When temperatures hit 50-60 F. especially if it is sunny, remove the tops of the jugs so the seedlings won't fry. Cover again in the evening.

When the seedlings have produced at least two sets of true leaves, it is time to transplant them into individual containers to allow the roots to grow and then transplant them into the garden.

### **What to Sow in Milk Jug Seed Pots**

Seeds that require cold stratification, hardy perennials and hardy annuals, and many native plants can be started in milk jug seed pots in early to mid-winter.

Cold crops like brassicas, native plants and wildflowers that require short periods of stratification, heirloom tomatoes, and many herbs can be started using this method in late winter through early spring. Tender annuals and summer vegetable crops that require warmer temps to germinate and don't reach maturity until late summer (tomatoes, peppers, basil) can also be started in milk jugs during this time or later.

The information on your seed packets will also help you to figure out which seeds should be planted when. 'Direct sow after all danger of frost has passed' becomes code for planting in late winter/early spring, and 'start indoors 3-4 weeks before average last frost' means sow in milk jugs in mid to later winter, while "sow 4-6 weeks before average last frost" indicates planting time in early to mid-winter.

Lastly, but most importantly, remember to clearly label your pots as you sow them with waterproof ink or paint!

Article from Gardening Know How: <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com>