

HANKERING FOR THE REAL DIRT

WITH RAKING, PRUNING, MULCHING, TRIMMING, GARDENERS GEAR UP FOR THE COMING OF SPRING

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So stunning were the lush roses, the camellia and a single yellow-berried holly flanking the Guilford Tudor that Faye Coscia, a transplant who bought the home late last year.

Through the doldrums of winter, Coscia watched her beds of perennials, bushes and a vast vegetable garden lie dormant, all the while her hands in preparation for an abundant flowering come spring.

"I actually bought the house for the garden," said Coscia, who was searching at a garden store yesterday for a sturdy pair of shears. "I'd be a gardening bug. I'm hoping it doesn't stay cool too long."

With the full thrust of warmer temperatures still at least a month away, gardening aficionados are nevertheless gearing up: raking, pruning, mulching.

And finding joy in the sedate activity of mining seed and plant catalogs.

"People get really anxious to get out there and start gardening," said Peter Bieneman, the general manager of Green Fields, a nursery company in Baltimore. "The real die-hard gardeners really want to get out there and do something. True gardeners are people who will do even on a very cold day."

And there's always indoor gardening.

The thermostat read a steamy 85 degrees yesterday in the greenhouse, which sits on land at Northern Parkway and Falls Road that has been a nursery since 1923.

Inside its glass walls, the expanse of greenery ranged from the more mundane palm tree, a classically freckled Florida Beauty, the waxy leaves of a jade plant, and the more exotic bamboo and cacti.

But for starters, healthy soil is king.

"A lot of people are very miserable with their lawns, and it's because they're trying to grow grass where grass isn't supposed to grow," said Traunfeld, director of the Home & Garden Information Center, part of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Maryland.

The first step, Traunfeld said, is keeping the soil healthy by adding organic matter to improve its quality. Lawn clippings, for example, stay away. Add the scraps to your soil for added nutrients, said Traunfeld, who emphasizes ecological gardening that decreases damage to the soil.

Attracting insects makes for happy gardening, too, Traunfeld said.

Pollinators, important for vegetable growing, are attracted to small flowers such as marigolds and zinnias.

But excited as gardeners may be to get a jump-start on their yards, it's best to save the digging until later.

"As long as you can dig into the soil, you can move plants," Traunfeld said. "But there's a little trick there: If the soil's wet, you should not dig. It will damage the soil particles."

Still, those eager to start getting their hands dirty can begin their tomato and pepper planting - inside.

Both have long germination periods of eight to 10 weeks, Bieneman said, making them perfect candidates for tray planting inside, and later to be moved to the ground.

Anticipating the planting season this year, with the bright blooms of pansies and primrose, the harbingers of spring, were Yen Wu and her husband Thomas, who shopped yesterday for two houseplants.

The couple moved to their Medfield home a little over a year ago, finding their garden strewn with wildflowers, overgrown weeds and old

Yet before tackling the overhaul later this season, they geared up by shopping for plants that will survive without much sunlight inside the

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She hoped for better results, after a peace plant she received as a gift from a friend died. Her pet kitten had toppled it, and in an attempt elegant plant, she repotted it, a move she said forced its death.

"I just felt like I failed the plant," Wu said. "I got emotional."

Yesterday she found solace in another peace plant, its vibrant green leaves and still-closed white bulb swaying under the gentle flow of :

"It just spruces up the house," Wu said. "It makes it more alive."

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What you can do now

Spreading seed on your lawn in late February through March gives it a head start on weeds and will make it thicker.

Have your soil tested and apply limestone now to raise pH, if necessary.

Begin to map out your garden plan, rotating crops.

Start sowing seeds of spinach, lettuce, kale, mustard, sorrel, corn salad and other greens indoors under fluorescent tubes.

Fresh tarragon, rosemary and mint sprigs can be rooted indoors and set outdoors in pots or garden beds in May.

Annual flower plants can be started and grown indoors under cool, white fluorescent lights.

Gently rake out leaves and debris from groundcovers and prune out dead leaves and stems to prevent foliage diseases in the spring.

Remove tree branches broken by winter weather, prune out dead or diseased branches and make any necessary cosmetic cuts to trees

[Source: Maryland Cooperative Extension]

Credit: Sun reporter

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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