

## High Sierra Early Spring Gardening

Springtime is the season of melting snow, broken shrubs, straw-brown lawns and mud. The deciduous trees and shrubs are naked and the snows are receding so the ground starting to see the sunshine. It's nice to have some evergreen shrubs in your landscape to emerge from under the snow and give your garden the appearance of life at this time of year. Mugo pines, Cotoneaster dammeri, Icee Blue Juniper, Oregon Grape, PJM Rhododendron, or 'Blue Girl' holly provide nice greens to the garden. You can also plant perennials like Bergenia, Iberis and Teucreum that keep their foliage year round.

*"Springtime demands freedom of expression... spring effects therefore, should be naturalistic – surprising as nature is surprising, startling with unexpectedness."\** **Wise Garden Encyclopedia.**

*"In the High Sierra, April is a winter month that happens to give us some incredibly nice spring-like days"* -**Villager Sound-byte**

Little warm spots in the garden viewed from windows are ideal places to plant the "harbingers of spring" that cheer us as winter wanes. Plant Crocus, Rock Garden Narcissus, Scilla and Chionodoxa bulbs in fall.

**Soil Preparation** – Our mineral soils need amendments to help support plant life. If you were unable to prepare your garden soil in fall, do it as soon as possible in spring. When your native earth is free of snow and no longer muddy, spread a thick layer of **mature compost (Gromulch)** or well-aged farmyard manure blend over your beds. Soil compacted by tons of heavy snow should be loosened and improved. Use a **spading fork** to pry up and aerate the soil without actually turning it. If the beds are new, mix compost and organic fertilizer deeply into the soil.

**Seeds** – Techniques vary with what you're seeding. **Lawn, clover and wildflower seed** can be mixed with compost and simply tossed where they're wanted. **Vegetable seeds** need a clean well-screened and level bed. Seeds of hardy plants like radish, beet, poppy and flax should be sown as soon as the soil is workable so they can benefit from the moist conditions. **Sweet Pea seeds** can

be planted in early April in a 3" trench, gradually filled as the seedlings grow. Sweet peas love **G&B Bioactive fertilizer, lime and manure.**

Seeds of plants not hardy enough for cold outdoor temperatures should be started indoors, in hot beds or in greenhouses. The seedlings will need to be **hardened** with row- cover, in a cold frame or on a sheltered porch before being planted out later in May.

**Wildflower Seed** – In our experience, late winter - early spring is the best time to spread wildflower seed in areas where they'll receive little care. This early, the soil surface is usually moist and we nearly always get more snow and rain. We have

several specially formulated (and often modified) Villager meadow, restoration and "Wildflower", mixes to provide reliable and lasting summer color. Follow the easy instructions on either the **Truckee Garden** or **Mt. Native Wildflower** or our **Strictly Native mix.**

**Lawns** – When the snow has melted and the soil is no longer wet, rake to remove sticks, pine needles and the matted dead straw-like old grass blades. Allowing air, light and warmth into the turf speeds spring rejuvenation. Top-dress lawns with a light layer (1/8"=2cu.ft./200sq.ft.) of **Kellogg's Topper**. Topper can be used atop snow to hasten melting and provide mulch to the garden. Mature compost will reintroduce beneficial microbes into the lawn to help decompose the straw, kill pathogens and deliver a mild feeding. Low areas may be brought to grade over the season with top dressings of topsoil every month. **Biosol and G&B organic lawn fertilizers** feed the soil so the soil can nurture the plants. They are very slow releasing and should be applied with top dressing. Aerating is important for our snow-compacted soils and clay-grown sod. It's best to aerate before topdressing. A **spading fork** works efficiently to pry loose and "lift" compacted soils. A motorized "plugger" from Truckee Rents is an easier option. A healthy soil beneath your lawn will only need 1-2 feedings of organic fertilizer each year. Your mower should be set to at least 3 1/2" high to promote deep roots and vigor.



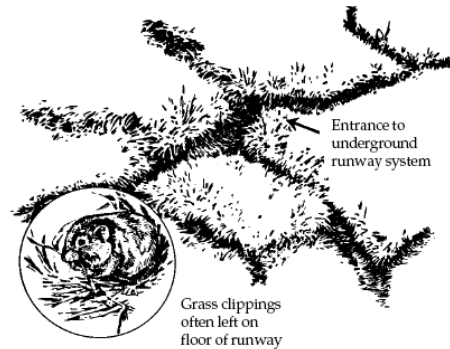
By the way, chemical lawn fertilizers diminish populations of beneficial microorganisms, increase thatch build-up, destroy soil structure, inhibit water up-take, leach into our ground water and reduce your lawn's resistance to insects and diseases.

**Lawns that have suffered winter damage** by meadow mice (voles), pocket gophers or dog urine should be attended to now. Vigorously rake damaged areas. Fill-in low or vole-trenched areas with sandy **premium Topsoil**. Loosen compacted soils with a **spading fork**; work in a little **G&B Organic fertilizer with Topper** and a matching seed blend. Add a couple of tablespoons-full of sugar to each 8" dog spot to feed soil bacteria and tie-up excess nitrogen. Lightly cover the seed with no more than 1/8" of **Kellogg's Topper**. Treat the repair spots as you would new lawn: do not let them dry out. (See: Villager Lawn Care handout).

**Watering** – If there hasn't been any substantial rain or snow and the soil is exposed, it may be dry. Your plants may need water. **First of all, if you have bare soil you need to mulch. Three inches of mulch can reduce irrigation needs by 30%.** In very dry years, you may need to water as early as February, depending on your location and microclimate. Lawns begin to use water soon after they are out from under the snow (although they do not need irrigation until the soil begins to dry). Cool temperatures slow moisture loss but sunny lawns are the first to need watering.

**Fertilizing** – Organic fertilizers feed the soil and a healthy soil nurtures and protects plant life. *With millions of tons of chemical fertilizers used each year in the U.S., crop yields per acre are near the lowest in the world. Old World countries that have relied on manures and composts for 50 centuries have extraordinary yields, many times those of the U.S.* Generally the best early feedings are composts and manures that do more for the soil biology rather than feeding plants directly. Use spring manures for asparagus, roses and rhubarb. *“Commercial fertilizers add no permanent value to the soils... it is exactly this thing that composts accomplish”* Early applications of seaweed can help plants fight diseases while increasing new root production.

**Seed Starting – Outdoor Now:** wildflowers, sweet pea, sunflower, Flander's poppy, lupine, larkspur, Calendula, Shasta daisy. / Vegetables including: arugula, kale, radish, beet, parsnip (by early April)



We will often lay clear or black plastic over an annual vegetable bed for a few days to warm the soil before planting seeds outdoors. Much longer and you cook the soil.

**Seed Starting – Indoor Now** – perennials, vegetables including: tomato: (by first Tuesday in March - town meeting day) tomatillo, pepper, etc... lettuce, broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts indoors now to put in cold frames soon.

**Propagation** – Some shrubs are easily propagated from hard-wood cuttings: old or end-of-growing season cuttings (Spiraea, willow, current, etc..). Willow stakes can be harvested and driven into the ground now.

**Bottom Heat** – If you are starting seeds, you need a heat mat. Without a thermostat, most heat mats are automatically set 10-15° above ambient air temp. A heat mat speeds germination and root growth in seedlings, increase rooting of cuttings. It is important to monitor watering a little more closely when using heat. Use a well-insulated material beneath the heat mat to retain or reflect the warmth.

**Indoor Lights** – Lighting for seedlings is fairly simple and cheap. Lighting for indoor vegetable production requires a little more specificity. To grow seedlings we use two, four-foot shop lights. Specialty “grow” tubes like **Agrosun** can help seedlings. Fluorescent and LED lights should be kept not more than a few inches from the plants because the weak light dissipates quickly. Larger and more powerful high intensity discharge (HID) lights cost more but provide the equivalent of sunlight to a large area for year round indoor gardening. One 400W metal halide (MH) light provides the equivalent of 20, 4' fluorescent tubes and can be placed 4-5' above the plants.

**Rockwool** is an excellent material for starting seeds or cuttings. Made from spun rock, this light material holds water while providing plenty of air. No more “damping off” from growing in soggy peat pellets. Start your seeds or clone cuttings in small rockwool cubes. Once rooted, the cubes can be transferred to a larger piece of rockwool or planted directly in soil, indoor or out.

**Starter Soil / Seedling Mix** - Peat-lite mixes, usually contain peat moss and perlite to hold moisture and nutrients yet provide excellent aeration. Peat can easily become over saturated.

**Peat Pots, Pulp Pots and Coir** – Peat pots are made from pressed peat moss and rapidly decompose in the soil. They are excellent for starting seeds of difficult to transplant seedlings like zucchini and other cucurbits. Coir pots are made from renewable coconut husks and will last just a little longer than peat. Coir is also used as a soil amendment for excellent moisture retention.

**Forcing** Flowering shrubs and trees – forsythia, apple, hawthorn, plum, cherry, whatever...

**Forcing** willow, dogwood, stems – these shrubs can be coppiced: severely cut back in spring, year after year to encourage colorful new growth.

**Compost Piles** – Add materials to your compost during the winter. Plant tissues freeze and thaw repeatedly and break down over winter and are more easily digested by composting microbes and worms as soil warms up.

**Pruning** – If you have the time now... Pruning is best accomplished just before bud break. The plant will be moving water and nutrients into the growing branches and cuts will **seal** quickly. If we wait longer, the plant wastes more resources in the material we remove. Potentilla, needs periodic spring pruning, as it blooms on new wood. Ribes, Cornus and Prunus will branch more densely if pruned early. Lilacs and Viburnum two favorite spring flowering shrubs, may be carefully pruned now if one is cautious not to remove the fat flower buds on some of the tips. Raspberries canes should be thinned, tipped and the old wood removed. Gooseberries and currants bear on old wood; so only careful thinning of extra canes should be done.

**Dormant Oil Spray** – Refined mineral and vegetable oils are excellent for hard to control

pests like spider mites or recurrent aphids. Oil sprays are used while plant buds are still closed. Most are also labeled for use as a plant polish and they will make your houseplants shine while smothering insects and their eggs.

**Lime Sulfur Spray** – This dormant spray is used against stubborn insects including scale and mites and against some fungi including apple scab.

**Neem Oil** - Neem has been used medicinally and agriculturally in India for thousands of years. It is anti fungal, insecticidal and it smothers insects and their eggs. Neem is also mildly systemic and it has insect repellent properties. We have used it when the aspen begin to break dormancy to prevent sawflies (who cause a leaf fold) from landing and laying eggs.

**Lime** – If not done in the fall, now is a good time to apply lime over the soil of gardens. Lilac, Peony, Dianthus, Clover and Bluegrass are all especially appreciative of regular liming.

**Raking** – Raking early, if soil is frozen, and the needles are not can make cleanup easy. Cleaning up dead foliage from around perennials will reduce insect problems this summer. Replace what you rake up with compost mulch.

**Mulching** – Mulch retains the little moisture we have, suppresses weeds and may prolong dormancy in the early season. Newspaper or cardboard under wood chips (sheet mulch) for large areas is extremely effective for weed suppression and soil improvement.

**Tree Repair** and resurrection - wood screws, bolts, washers and nuts all can be used to temporarily repair trees and shrubs. Masking tape is another useful tool in tree training. The vascular tissue in our trees and shrubs is basically a sheet, several layers of tubes, that wrap the plants between the wood that is dead, and the bark or cork that is also dead. If you roll a piece of paper into a tube, that’s a good representation of the vascular cambium from which the xylem and phloem are produced.

**Planting, Transplanting** – may be done now if the soil is not frozen. Conifers put on as much as 80% of their root system expansion in early spring and deciduous plants produce as much as 20% in spring before top growth begins.