

## April in the Garden on Salt Spring Patti Bauer

There is little risk of frost towards the middle of April and your garden is vying for your attention. Now is the time to weed away and prep your garden beds. Weeding now also helps to aerate the soil; reducing airborne disease and helps microorganisms deliver nutrients to your crops.

Create a 5-inch trench, or air barrier around your beds to stop any grasses, which are rhizomatic, from creeping into the beds.

If you are blessed with a bounty of nettles nearby, you can chop the nettle greens (no roots) into your beds. Nettles are rich in calcium, copper, iron, selenium, magnesium, manganese, phosphorus, potassium, sulphur and more. There is no need to purchase fertilizers shipped from far away places when the abundance of fertility is at your doorstep. Another beautiful soil conditioner and 'green manure' is comfrey leaf. Grow comfrey as biomass to condition the soil. Find a permanent place to plant it - one small root where you do not want it will survive and be there for eternity. The abundance of minerals and nutrients comfrey provides is second to none. I use only the leaves all summer long as mulch that slowly decomposes and releases its nutrients into the soil.

Decomposed manure or compost is always the best addition to your soil. Once your bed is prepped, leave it for at least four days before planting to allow it to settle and for weed seeds to germinate. This saves heavy weeding later.

April is the busiest time to start seedlings. Although not sterile, the recycling depot and garden centers have many secondhand 4-inch pots for your starts. I have yet to try it, but there is a wooden tool from Lee Valley that makes little pots for starts out of recycled newspaper that you can plant directly. I like this idea.

Plant seeds in a 50-50 mix of compost and sand. Many seeds require only a thin layer of soil mix on top to allow for germination. Check your planting guideline for seeding depth. Make sure flats are in a warm protected spot that are free from wind and pelting rain. A greenhouse or windowsill will do. Check your seeded flats or pots daily for moisture. Constant moist soil is crucial during germination and when the plants are young.

When seedlings are ready, I like to leave my seeded flat out for at least a couple of days, covered at night with cloche, near to where I will transplant in order to 'harden' them off, or acclimatize the seedling to its new home.

A seedling is ready to transplant when it has two or three leaves.

Transplant by holding the seed leaves, not the stems, in the late afternoon or evening. Seedlings dry out during the day and we want to minimize water loss, and help them recover from the shock of transplanting overnight. Water them well.

Direct sow half-hardy plants like carrots, cilantro, dill, chives, arugula, radishes, beets, chard, peas, favas and spuds. In late April even scarlet runner beans planted around a tall pole will get off to a good start. You can sow indoors your cabbage, broccoli, and brussel sprouts. In late April sow indoors to transplant later your cukes, melons, summer and winter squash. For winter gardens leek and onion starts or sets, parsley, burdock (Gobo), & celeriac are happy to go in the ground.

Mulch all perennial beds. If you have not done so yet, plant or transplant, weed and thin your strawberries and raspberry canes. Imagine the beauty of the berries inside your belly this summer....

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