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When is it really, truly Spring? New England gardeners ask themselves that question year after year and, in reality, the answer is always the same: When you say it is! Never mind the weather reports and forecasts, forget about the confusion caused by warm weather at Christmas and thunder and lightning storms in February, ice in early April or the annoyance of moving the clocks forward while the birds are still depending on the feeders and the ground is frozen solid. Spring comes on that magical day when you step outside and know that the air and the light are somehow different, that that noise you heard was indeed a bird chirping in its nest, and that those little green things pushing through will grow up to be the daffodils you so carefully planted in the fall! Take each day as it comes and remember that Mother Nature has often been described as capricious, willful and determined to reduce Connecticut gardeners to a permanent state of confusion. So far this year, she has been highly successful as Snowdrops bloomed in January, Forsythia budded in February and Lilacs began to leaf out in March! But a New England gardener learns to “go with the flow” and adapt to change and all we really care about is that we’re back in the garden again!

Daytime winter temperatures higher than normal have pushed some bushes and flowering trees well ahead of their normal schedule. Many perennials, usually slow to break dormancy, may leaf out weeks ahead of their regular time frame. Keep an eye out for frost warnings and protect tender plants if necessary, using old sheets or towels but not plastic. Sometimes, gardeners tend to forget that weather patterns usually “average out” over a period of years...but this has been a most unusual winter!

Consider setting up a chart to monitor the sequence and length of bloom from your bushes and flowering trees and to make note of what you see from the house. It is possible to have a variety of bushes flowering from April into October, providing a background for your perennial beds, screening for the vegetable garden and privacy for sitting areas, decks and terraces. Using bushes is an easy way to reduce garden maintenance as many take care of themselves with a minimum of tweaking. Some garden designers like to ensure that inside and outside colors used compliment each other and that you always have something attractive to look at from the room in the house where you spend the most time. All gardens change as they mature and careful editing and/or additions will help you enjoy what you have created even more. In fact, the surrounding background landscape also changes over time and may alter the way you look at and use your garden. All these factors affect your over-all garden plan.

Flower Show

The 2016 Newport Flower Show will be held June 24, 25 and 26 at Rosecliff in Newport, RI. This year’s theme is “The Gilded Age: Artful Living” and honors the time when nearly every aspect of life was elevated to an art form. Gardens were stages for nature’s best performances and houses showcased a lifetime of

treasures. This will be a celebration! Features include designer display gardens, horticultural exhibits, demonstrations and classes in Botanical Arts and Floral Design and over 85 vendors. Special guests include Bunny Williams, Bruno Duarte and Donna Lane. The Garden Club of America has elevated the Newport Floral Show to the status of a Major Flower Show, on a par with Philadelphia, Atlanta and Boston. This national and international status allows the show to award the GCA's highest Flower Show awards. Funds raised by the Show are used for the continued restoration and preservation of the Newport Preservation Society's 88 acres of historic landscapes, gardens and trees. For tickets and further information go to:

www.newportmansions.org/events/newport-flower-show

Summer Gardens to Visit

The Garden Conservancy runs self-guided tours of hundreds of private gardens from coast to coast. Most of the gardens are only open to the public once a year. Open Days in Connecticut run through September 11 with admission at \$7 for an adult. No reservations are required; Open Days are rain or shine events. Visit www.gardenconservancy.org to search by garden, city or state. Open Days are also listed for near-by Rhode Island, New York and Massachusetts.

The Really-Must-Do-Now List

Spring garden chores (see the information Sheet on the Acer Gardens website) can seem daunting but don't be overwhelmed by the list. Each garden is different and not all chores are necessary.

Clean up and rake off the garden beds; get rid of dead foliage. Remove dead or dying branches on trees and shrubs which were injured by disease, storms or animals.

Cut down grasses and any perennials you left standing in the fall.

Fertilize your garden beds and don't plant anything new until the soil is completely friable ... grab a handful of soil and squeeze it. If water runs out or the soil compacts into a clump, it's too soon to work it.

Weed, weed and weed again!

Cut back old growth from yellow and red-stemmed Dogwood bushes.

Clean-up Hellebores as they finish blooming.

Trim down Buddleias, Caryopteris and Spireas to about 18" even if they are showing growth.

Prune : Roses, as needed, Azaleas and Mountain Laurel after they bloom.

The Plant of the Month will be available the first of each month, starting in April, at the nursery near the checkout table. These plants are carefully chosen to feature current bloom times and to serve as an accent in your garden. Try something new!

April: **Galium** (Sweet Woodruff)

Zone 4-8 Height: 8-12" Spread: 6-18"

This mat-forming perennial is most often grown as a ground cover for moist, shady areas and features small, fragrant white flowers in April and May. Low-maintenance, the plant is a fixture in herb and rock gardens, shady borders and naturalized areas, often used instead of Pachysandra or Myrtle. If the plants receive too much sun they will go dormant by mid-summer. Dried Galium leaves are very popular in potpourri mixtures.

May: **Geum**

Zone: 3-7 Height: 6-18" Spread: 12"

Although at its best when grown in full sun, Geum will tolerate some light shade but prefers a well-drained soil. This native prairie plant features long-blooming, dangling flowers with fluffy blossoms in cheerful shades of yellow and orange; the later seed heads remind many gardeners of feather dusters! Flowering profusely in late spring, Geum makes a cheerful edging to flower beds but will need to be divided every few years.

June: **Peony** (container grown)

Zone: 3-8 Height: 2-4' Spread: 2-3 ½'

The big blooms of the peony are the glory of early June with lush foliage remaining all summer long. They like full sun and average soil and, once planted, require little on-going care. Be sure not to plant too deeply. In the fall, after a heavy frost, cut the stems to within 3" of the soil surface. Winter cold actually helps peonies flower well. Extremely long-lived, peonies can grow 10 years or more without needing division and do not like to be moved once they are established.

Spring Workshop

On May 15, 2016, Acer Gardens will sponsor a free workshop ... **Annuals Old & New** ... conducted by Mitch Rand of Ball Horticulture. This workshop will be held from 9-10 a.m. and will give an overview of the exciting changes in the annual world. Mitch will emphasize the new varieties available to the home gardener. Watch your email for further announcements and plan on attending!

Seasonal Reminders

Available Spring products at the nursery will include pelletized lime, pre-emergent fertilizer, lawn and garden fertilizer, Milorganite, organic lawn and garden products, grass seed, straw and control products for deer, insects, rabbits, voles, weeds, bugs and disease. April is the ideal time to apply lime, if needed, to the lawn, fertilize and use pre-emergent weed control. Give your Rhododendrons and Azaleas a feeding of Holly Tone.

April and May are ideal times for pruning evergreens. Remove dead, diseased or undesirable wood but remember to pay attention to the basic shape of the evergreen.

Photograph your bulbs as they begin to bloom and keep them as a permanent record. The photos will be helpful next fall as you plan where to plant new bulbs.)

Connecticut celebrates National Arbor Day on April 29, 2016 this year. What better way to celebrate a birthday or anniversary than to plant a tree!

Cut back Gaura, Lavender, Perovskia and Montauk Daisies when you start to see bud break.

If cutting Tulips for the house, do not use more than a few inches of water in the vase and add 1 tsp. of bleach to the water; change the water regularly. Keep cut Lilacs out of direct sunlight to discourage wilting.

Deer quickly get used to a specific repellent so it's a good idea to rotate the products you use fairly often.

Check the nursery web site to access relevant Information Sheets on attracting hummingbirds and butterflies.

Aftercare for Bulbs

Don't forget to deadhead Daffodils and Tulips as they stop blooming. Cut the flowers off but let the stems and leaves turn brown before you cut them down. Bulb experts advise against braiding the leaves. You want all that nutrition from the leaves to go back into the bulbs.

Adding spreading plants to your bulb areas will cover up the fading bulbs and give your garden a second wind. Many Daffodils will happily naturalize and spread over years but, in this climate, most tulips have a limited life span of 3-4 years. If you plant your Tulips among perennials slow to break in the Spring, the growing foliage will help to disguise the dying tulip foliage.

Spring Pruning

Buddleia, or Butterfly Bush, should be cut back to 12"-18" by mid- April, even though they will be showing signs of new growth. Deadheading the faded flowers all summer will keep the bush blooming well into the fall. Prune other flowering shrubs (such as Azaleas and Mountain Laurel) just after they have bloomed.

Remember that most Hydrangeas (not hydrangea arborescens ... Annabelle and Samantha), flower on old wood. Remove any dead or broken branches in spring but do not prune. Fertilizing with a product containing 18-5-9 will encourage flowering. Spent blooms should be removed after flowering. Any light pruning should be done directly after bloom before the bushes set next year's flowers.

Lilac bushes should be pruned each year, after blooming. Remove all spent blossoms. Trim and clear out larger stems from the center to increase air space. You can leave some small suckers/shoots at ground level to develop into larger stems. This will encourage a wider bloom area. Lightly shape the bush until you like the way it looks but don't give it an un-natural "flat top".

Mature Rhododendrons seldom need pruning but, if you must, prune right after they bloom as they set next year's flowers very quickly. Look for the little green leaf buds on the stem and cut ½" above them. Let the natural shape of the plant dictate your pruning.

Azaleas and Weigela bloom on wood at least one year old. After bloom, these bushes should be lightly hand pruned in order to maintain the natural shape of the bush. Carefully remove selected old wood every 3 years, allowing the bush to rejuvenate itself.

Fertilizing and Mulching Basics

All plants need nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, nutrients essential to helping plants make healthy leaves, develop strong roots and digest their food. Although these elements are usually present in the soil, the wise gardener knows that soil changes over time and the nutrients must be replenished. The home gardener must choose between granular or water soluble fertilizer. Granular fertilizer delivers food slowly but lasts a long time. Water soluble fertilizers are faster acting but must be applied more frequently.

Most bushes and trees like an application of granular fertilizer in early spring. Annuals like additional boosts of water soluble fertilizer throughout the growing season. Wait until the ground has really warmed up before you fertilize perennials, annuals and vegetables. Roses are always hungry and will benefit from the application of light soluble fertilizer every week during their blooming season. Don't apply fertilizer on wet or windy days ... it will only be wasted.

Decorative mulches are an essential part of low-maintenance landscapes, offering many benefits to your plants and soil. They reduce the amount of water lost through evaporation, keep the soil cooler during the heat of the summer, suppress weed growth and help control erosion. Decomposing over time, mulches add nutrients and organic matter to the soil. There are a few general rules:

Do not place mulch directly against plant stems or tree bases.

Apply mulch layers no more than 1-3" thick.

Thoroughly water newly installed wood or bark mulches.

Don't automatically renew mulch every year --- assess your needs realistically.

Using Pansies

Traditional pansies bloom from spring through early summer, with some repeat bloom in the fall. They are ideal used as edgings, can be popped in rock walls and along paths and make perfect container plants. Try planting Pansies with other cool-season and frost resistant plants. Consider combining them with Alyssum, English Daisies, Viola, Lobelia and Primroses. Lettuce and Parsley add a light touch to Pansy planters and are easily harvested. Many herbs combine well with pansies and will keep going long after the Pansies have finished. Even a small evergreen will serve as a good background to pansies and provide a strong line to the container. Cold-hardy annuals ... Osteospermum, Diascia, and Nemesia ... can provide a subtle color echo to pansies in the violet to purple range. Pansies like cool temperatures but you can help them last a bit longer as the weather warms up.

Fertilize them only at planting time, using a slow-release granular fertilizer. As the plants start to get leggy, cut them back a few inches. Make sure these containers get no more than 6 hours of sun a day. Putting them in the shade may actually help them regroup to bloom again in cooler fall weather.

Dividing Perennials

In general, most perennials should be divided in the spring which allows enough time for the new divisions to bloom and become established before winter. Here in Connecticut we are able to divide easily until mid-May. Grasses are best divided in early spring because they do their aggressive growing in the hot days of summer. Peonies and Iris should be divided in the fall.

Many plants (Black-eyed Susan and Leucanthemum e.g.) benefit from frequent division and almost seem to need it to thrive. Simply dig up the plant and...with your fingers...gently separate the plant into multiple sections. Plant at once, setting the new plant at the same soil level. Tamp the soil down around the plant so that water can pool; protect the new plant from strong sun until it is established.

Some plants should be divided into large segments as early as possible. These include Lamium, Brunnera, Dendranthemum, Asters, Sedum, Hosta, Monarda, Helenium and Coneflowers. Pulling pieces from the outer edges of the clump makes for easy dividing. Place the divisions so that their “best side” is displayed well.

Divide a perennial when it is still blooming well and replenish the soil with organic matter. Keep the best looking sections to replant and discard any which look weak or diseased. Give the new divisions plenty of spreading room and water as appropriate.

Division of Hostas, Daylilies and Grasses calls for real strength and is often done after a good, soaking rain. The best tool for this is a sturdy garden shovel or fork. Cut the dug-up plant in half or thirds with a sharp knife or the shovel and plant at once.

Caring for Roses

Roses are much less demanding than many gardeners think! They are happy in well-drained soil, in full sun (at least 6 hours a day), and would like to be 3’ away from their neighbors. Climbing roses need support and should be positioned so that there is 3” of air space between the support and the wall or fence. Roses can be grown in containers with good drainage. (Adding gravel to the bottom of the container will help with the watering.) Keep the soil surface loose around all roses by cultivating the soil shallowly so as to avoid injuring the roots.

Roses are happiest with the equivalent of 1” of rainfall each week. Avoid getting the foliage wet and keep the water on the soil. (Container-grown roses will need more frequent watering.)

Deadhead faded blooms to keep your roses blooming. Cut back to just below the first 5-leaf stem to promote return growth.

A 2-4” layer of mulch will help your roses retain moisture and maintain good soil temperature. Keep the mulch away from the stems.

Garden Walk-throughs

In response to many on-going requests, Sharon will be starting a series of informal walk-throughs in her garden over the coming summer months. She will discuss why she makes the choices of what to plant and how she decides on the general “look” of her garden. Ask questions and learn how a garden develops over time and changes to accommodate both the site and a gardener’s preferences. Please watch your email for announcements of these eagerly anticipated events.

Creating Focal Points in the Garden

A focal point is simply something in the garden that draws your eye to an area you wish to emphasize. Some focal points are features in themselves such as a planter on a pedestal or a set of steps. Others pull

you further into the garden or highlight something unusual: benches, statues, water or boulders. Less is always more ... don't create a confused space by using too many focal points. One per garden area is always enough. Focal points can also be a reflection of your own unique gardening personality and designed to express your particular interests.

Consider these simple qualities that make an object a true focal point:

Color. Choose a focal point that offers a strong color contrast to its surroundings whether it is a painted object or a dramatic foliage plant or evergreen.

Height. Objects that are higher than the surroundings attract the eye instantly. Be careful not to make the object so high that your eye leaves the garden instead of focusing on what is beneath the focal point.

Bulk. Some garden objects ... benches, a grouping of chairs, a large urn, a rock ... stand out because they appear to be heavier than the surrounding garden foliage and therefore showcase the plants around them.

Geometric Shape. Manmade objects ... raised planters, paired pedestals, benches, birdbaths etc. ... stand out from the shapes of the plants and are noticed because they are different from the surrounding plants.

Many focal points will feature more than one of the above qualities. Only you can decide what works to your garden's advantage.

Ferns to the Rescue

No perennials bloom forever so, to fill gaps, a gardener needs to rely on plants that display interesting foliage and give substance to the landscape. Needing little care, Ferns are a logical and easy choice.

Some of the oldest plants in the world, Ferns contribute to a gardener's landscape in a wide variety of ways. They range from large to small, come in an extensive array of green colors with differing foliage and combine well with other plants. Most thrive in part to full shade (although some can handle dappled morning sun) and prefer an enriched, water-retentive soil. Ferns can be used to soften landscape borders or to give background to flowers and low, spreading shrubs. Planted with bulbs, their growing fronds will spread and cover up dying late spring bulb foliage. Best of all: they are deer and vole resistant!

Although they look wonderful lining a wooded path or shaded patio, ferns can be used as accents to draw attention to other plants, shrubs, tree trunks and even benches. You can add soft textures to your landscape by planting ferns in colonies and letting them spread as a ground cover. Ferns combine well with many plants including Astilbe, Bergenia, Galium, Heuchera, Hostas, Lamium, Sedges and Wildflowers. Used in containers, Ferns will work well with Lamiastrum, Lysimachia, Veronica, Vinca and Bleeding Hearts.

Ferns respond well to an early spring application of a slow release fertilizer or a fall top-dressing of leaf-mold. They seldom need maintenance; the deciduous types die back each fall and return their nutrients to the soil. Consider planting:

Dryopteris erythrosora (Autumn Fern) Height: 18-24" Spread: 18-24"

This Fern is noted for its intermingling of dark green fronds with coppery-red new growth. Keep the plants evenly moist until they are well-established; they will eventually be almost drought-tolerant. Clumps

increase very slowly so it can be grown as a container plant. Removing dead fronds in the spring will keep the plant looking neat. Fertilize in the spring before new growth begins and divide mature clumps as needed.

Matteuccia struthiopteris (Ostrich Fern) Height: 3-5' Spread: 3-5'

A shady, damp corner of your garden is the perfect spot for Ostrich Fern. This plant should be sited where the gardener can admire its airy quality as the fronds move in the breeze. Ostrich Fern requires watering as it establishes itself and appreciates a little fertilizer from time to time but it will quickly form its spreading root system and fill in the available space. Many a problem area has been brightened by this fern.

Planting Gardens with Bird Appeal

If you want native birds flying around your garden, plant native flowers, bushes and trees! Birds would rather stick with their tried-and-true favorites: plants that feature seeds, berries and insects. Native plants offer all these as well as a wide choice of building material for birds ... twigs, dead leaves and bark strips as well as fallen needles from evergreens.

Planting Daisies (and their relatives) is an easy way to start a bird garden as their seeds are irresistible to many of our local birds. This plant family includes Sunflowers, Asters, Black-Eyed Susans, Liatris and Coneflowers. Adding bushes with berries to the general mix in your garden will attract a wide range of birds but they will strip ripe berries fast. Mature Viburnums fruit heavily and will keep the birds busy for weeks in late summer. Cardinals will devour the large red berries found on a Kousa Dogwood tree. Any Blueberry bush must be covered with netting or the birds will do all your harvesting for you!

Adding some trees (even young saplings) will provide sheltering branches to the bird population: oaks and maples offer insects for the birds as well as welcome shade. Cypress bushes provide welcome shelter and over-wintering birds will be grateful for the protection and hiding places found in its deep branches. Feeding birds in the summer is a personal choice ... having water available will be very welcome.

The Vegetable Garden

Acer Gardens is your "go to" place for vegetable seeds and starter plants. Knowledgeable staff will be happy to help you choose what you need to make your vegetable growing a pleasure and to answer questions.

Plotting your garden on graph paper will help you establish boundaries and maximize your available space. Remember to rotate your crop's positions from year to year to keep the soil fresh. If you are using rows be sure to leave access routes for weeding and fertilizing. More and more vegetable gardeners are going vertical in an effort to maximize available space ... tomatoes and cucumbers in particular benefit from this concept, as do peas and some squashes and melons. Hanging baskets can also be utilized for vegetables. Acer Gardens continues to offer an outstanding selection of seed varieties of popular gourmet vegetables and heirloom annuals.

Many vegetables can be planted as soon as you can work the soil. Leaf lettuces, such as Black Seeded Simpson, are harvested young and re-planting every 2 – 3 weeks will keep you harvesting into fall. (The nursery now carries pre-blended lettuce varieties, including both a Gourmet Mix and a Tasty Gourmet blend.) Arugula, cilantro and spinach will also continue producing on a similar schedule but do not re-plant

in the heat of the summer. Radishes, a fast and easy grower, can be planted in short rows at 2 – 3 week intervals. Spring is the optimum time to direct sow or plant peas, broccoli, cauliflower, beets, cabbage, leeks (plant Large American Flag now for fall harvest), carrots, parsley, onions, Swiss chard, kale and micro-greens. Try the productive blue Kale ... Winterbor ... which harvests in 53 days...a current gourmet favorite.

Late May is a good time to plant cucumbers, tomatoes, corn, peppers, melons, pumpkins, and squash. Plant basil near the tomatoes to discourage the insects that feed on them. Alyssum, Nasturtiums and Marigolds planted in the vegetable garden will fend off many aphids, thrips and beetles and will protect your squash and pumpkin crops. Fennel bulbs and onions can be planted now ... both hold well in the vegetable garden. If rabbits are a problem in your garden, the nursery is now carrying small-sized Tumbler tomatoes which will literally spill over the sides of a hanging basket. Now is the time to plant single bulb shallots. ‘Camelot’ is an outstanding choice, red skinned with a white interior. Plant in early to mid spring and harvest in summer when the tops fall and begin to brown. Dry in an airy place until ready to use.

The wide-ranging herb selection keeps expanding and now includes Stevia (the sugar substitute), Lemon Grass, a wide range of Thymes and Lemon Verbena (the leaves are wonderful in water or iced tea). Many basil varieties are resistant to downy mildew, including Lemon Basil, Emerald Frills and Ruby Frills. Thai Basil will be available again (try it with fish as well as using the leaves in oriental dishes.) Oregano ‘Hot and Spicy’ will add a mild chile pepper flavor to Mexican dishes. The nursery continues to carry Mexican Mint Marigold which can be used in place of tarragon. Most herbs will do well in patio and deck containers but Thai Basil should be grown separately as it actually needs to dry out between waterings .

Herbs can be more than kitchen companions to the vegetables you grow. Think about inter-planting herbs and vegetables in the garden. (Harvesting dinner will be easy!) Try basil and tomatoes, chives and carrots, rosemary and beans. Marjoram, oregano, sage and tarragon enhance many vegetables. Grow dill separately as it can become invasive and needs a lot of spreading room as well as successive plantings.

Acer Gardens’ Information sheet on **Growing Vegetables** is available on the web site and at the nursery.

Controlling Weeds in the Vegetable Garden

The time to attack potential weeds in the vegetable garden is early! The painting sections in hardware stores carry a black plastic which is much better than the “weed” fabric sold. Spread out, with the edges secured by rocks and the soil tilled up around it , it helps to warm up the soil and does not allow light penetration. This arrangement is ideal for squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplant and peppers. Just dig a hole through the plastic and insert the plant.

The area outside the black plastic sheet can be reserved for sowing seeds such as peas, lettuce, spinach, radishes, beets and/or carrots and string beans. As they become seedlings, mulch with newspaper and straw(not hay). You may still get a few weeds but they will be highly visible and easy to deal with. As summer progresses and you begin harvesting, mulch your bare areas with straw, renewing it if needed.

Growing Compact Vegetables and Herbs

Even if you don’t have a “real” vegetable garden, you can certainly grow herbs and many vegetables. The nursery has a large selection of herbs and vegetables which will all do well planted together in containers! Dwarf vegetables are always a good choice as are vegetables that take up little space (lettuce, radishes and

scallions) or crops that bear over a long time (tomatoes and peppers). “Bush” and “Compact” sizes will do well grown in containers or tucked into the front of flower beds. Try planting a Summer Salad container with a tomato, a cucumber, parsley and chives. Lettuce and containers are born companions. Plant seeds every 3-4 weeks for successive harvests. Some new cucumbers and squash plants are designed to be grown vertically and take up very little room.

Choosing vegetables with the same water and sun requirements will be a plus. Almost all vegetables do best when grown in full sunlight, at least 6 hours per day. Leaf vegetables (lettuce, greens, spinach and parsley) will tolerate a little shade, especially as the season lengthens.

Pick a container larger than you think you will need. Be sure the container has good drainage (holes in the bottom) because containers need more watering than vegetable beds as they dry out quickly from sun and wind. Some plants may require daily watering. Don't let the soil dry out between waterings as this could cause the plants to drop their flowers and fruits. Acer Gardens bagged potting mix is a good soil choice; use a slow release or organic fertilizer at planting time.

In response to customer requests, the nursery is offering many new varieties of compact vegetable plants this year. Many bear quickly, a definite advantage in this climate! Some outstanding selections include:

Compact vegetables:

Cucumber ‘Fanfare’

Showing good disease resistance, this All-American cucumber bears in 62 days.

Eggplant ‘Patio Baby’

Unique, this thornless plant bears 2-3” long eggplants 45 days after planting, and features a high yield.

Pepper ‘Ace’

This plant bears extra early: green peppers in 50 days, red peppers in 70 days. Tolerant of blossom drop, the plant has a high yield rate.

Heirloom Tomatoes:

Tomato ‘Amish Paste’

4’ high, this plant features irregularly plum-shaped fruit (8-oz. in size) with an excellent meaty flavor.

Tomato ‘San Marzano’

A favorite with cooks, this 40” high plum tomato bears in 70 days.

Tomato ‘Tumbler’

A cherry tomato ideal for hanging baskets and containers, this plant will bear in 49 days, producing large, sweet fruits. Harvest can run up to 6 lbs.

Using Garden Containers

It's time to think about containers again! Acer Gardens will have many pre-planted containers for you to choose from but, of course, you can bring your own empty container to the nursery and staff will be happy to help you design something just right for your garden. Maybe it's time to try a container featuring just one color but using varying shades of that color. Containers can be used to lead the eye along a path, to frame a view or to cover-up a temporary "hole". The possibilities are almost endless! You can change the look of your containers at will by changing the plantings. Troughs and containers have the advantage of portability and can be moved around the garden as the season advances or as "holes" develop. The nursery carries its own special bagged Alpine Soil (perfect for containers) as well as slow release fertilizer pellets ideal for container use.

Once again, Acer Gardens will be offering several Using Annuals in Containers workshops later this season and will also feature an upcoming workshop on using Wall Planters. Watch your email for the announcement of future times and dates for these events.

Accurate watering is key to growing good containers as is a good ratio of plant to pot. Think about where your containers will be placed as you choose your plants. Containers for decks and terraces will be in view 24/7 so they can be made to reflect how you choose to entertain or become extensions of the larger garden. A container sited for the "wow" factor can be filled to over-flowing with wild colors and luxurious blossom and you should feel free to depart from your normal style. After all, if it doesn't work it's easy to change! Be sure that all your container plants share the same sun, soil and water requirements and set up a realistic fertilizing schedule. Many gardeners photograph their containers as the season advances and keep them as guides for next year.

The nursery is offering a wide selection of new hanging basket containers, some of them pre-planted. Feel free to bring pictures of planted baskets which have caught your eye and let us help you add spark to your garden by using your own self-chosen plants.

Hardy Geraniums (Cranesbill)

These colorful, hardy Geraniums bloom from mid-spring to fall and are the perfect "tuck-in" plant. Perennial Geraniums prefer well-drained soil and do best in morning sun with afternoon shade; they make excellent companions to a wide variety of plants because of their mounding habit. Some cultivars become flowering groundcovers or tuck-ins in rock gardens. Some of the looser-branched cultivars are wonderful fillers in perennial beds with their airy branches interweaving with other plants and they will help hide the "bare knees" of other plants. A slow release fertilizer used at the start of the summer will see these plants through the growing season but because they were once wildflowers they don't expect much coddling. The taller cultivars may need light staking as the season advances. Perennial Geraniums are easily divided when the center of a mature plant shows open with a new ring of growth around it. You can dig chunks from the edges of the plant or lift the entire plant and section, disposing of the woody center. The best time to do this is early Spring or after the plant has bloomed. If you cut the plants down to 4" when bloom is over new foliage will quickly grow from the base. Reliable favorites include:

'Album' Height: 12 -14" Spread: 30"

This mounding plant is invaluable as an edging or rock garden plant and will fill in quickly to create a bushy groundcover. Clear white flowers bloom from late spring into summer. Plants stand up to heat and

humidity and are easily divided in spring or fall. Grow in partial shade to full sun.

Pink Penny' Height: 15-18" Spread: 23"

Neat mounds of mottled light-green foliage are topped with bright lavender-purple flowers from early summer to mid-fall. Ideal for rock gardens, containers and wall planters. Often chosen as accents, edgers and ground-cover. Grow in partial shade to full sun.

'Rise and Shine' Height: 6-8" Spread: 8-12"

Unusual rose-purple flowers with dark purple veins bloom from June until frost. Flowers will lighten towards pink as they age. Use as a rock garden plant or edger. The foliage will often turn red in the fall. This plant is bee friendly and attracts butterflies.

'Rozanne' Height: 1-2' Spread: 1-3'

Large violet-blue flowers make this plant a natural for mass planting. Prefers a moist soil, enriched with compost, but can handle extra sun. Very low maintenance, this perennial attracts butterflies and blooms most of the summer, making it a fine ground-cover.

'Orion' Height: 18-24" Spread: 20-30"

In bloom from June through August, the purple-blue flowers of this plant are very showy. This perennial is heat and humidity tolerant, will take full sun with some afternoon shade and is both rabbit and deer resistant. A wonderful filler plant, 'Orion' blends nicely with most other perennials.

Grow These Carefree Plants

Dianthus (Pinks)

With over 300 species of Dianthus available, this plant has something for everyone! Completely low-maintenance, Dianthus ranges from 6–24". Flowering happily from late spring to midsummer. Its blue-green, grassy foliage, spicy scent and bright colors are always popular in rock gardens and the front of a sunny border. They can even be grown in containers. Deer-resistant, Dianthus will attract birds. This plant prefers not to be mulched as it is a natural spreader; provide good drainage and divide every 3-4 years.

Phlox paniculata

Summer-blooming Phlox has been a favorite in American gardens for well over 100 years! Long-blooming (mid-summer to fall), large, well-established clumps can range from 3-4' and will provide an exclamation point to the summer garden. Drought-tolerant, Phlox combines well with Coneflowers, Daylilies, Monardas, Rudbeckia and some of the smaller grasses. It will help create a "cottage" look to a flower bed especially if shorter plants are used to cover its "knees". Highly attractive to birds, Phlox prefers a humus-rich soil and a little shade as they were originally woodland flowers. Their light, sweet fragrance is a hallmark of summer. Deadhead to encourage continuous bloom and divide large clumps every three years.

Agastache (Hyssop)

Also known as Hummingbird Mint, this perennial has everything going for it! Its long flower spikes offer color to the garden from mid-summer through fall. Ranging in height from 12-48", the plants form thick clumps, prefer full sun and good air circulation and will thrive in lean, dry soil. In fact, they do not want to be over-watered or over-fertilized and are generally considered totally carefree once established. The aromatic foliage and flowers are particularly appealing to hummingbirds, bees and butterflies but are deer and rabbit resistant. Agastache combines well with Lavender, Salvias, herbs (Sage and Rosemary) and summer-blooming grasses and should be sited where you can brush against the fragrant foliage.

Often-Asked Questions

What's the best way to water my new seedlings in their trays?

Using an old-fashioned turkey baster is an excellent way to control how much water your fragile new seedlings receive and lets you apply the moisture directly to the soil. Some turkey basters have ounce markings on the side which allows you to be sure they are all getting the same amount of water.

If I were a hummingbird, what would I want gardeners to grow for me?

Only 2 of the many species of hummingbirds actually get this far North to visit us so give them a warm welcome with Agastache, Columbine, Coral Bells, Daylilies, Lobelia, Monarda, Nicotiana, Petunia, Salvia, Shasta Daisies and Sweet William. The little birds feed 8 times a day on the sweet nectar of plants and prefer bright flowers with a tubular shape. Cardinal and Honeysuckle vines are great favorites. Check out Acer Gardens Information Sheet (web site) on hummingbirds to access a full list of hummingbird favorites.

I love to tuck in annuals here and there but I'm never sure when it's safe to plant them. What's the rule?

Gardeners are always anxious to get plants into the ground but annuals need a slightly longer runway than most perennials. Annuals have different designations and will thrive if you follow these simple rules:

Hardy annuals are frost hardy and can be set out when a light frost is still likely.

Half-hardy annuals will survive a very light frost and can be set out in moderate spring weather.

Tender annuals cannot come through any frost and prefer warm nights. Do not set them out until nights are regularly 50F. If in doubt, ask someone at the nursery ... better safe than sorry!

What can I do to be more "green" in my water usage?

Try grouping plants into "water usage" areas so that watering needs will be consistent. Improving the soil and using regionally suitable plants (both native and adapted) will help your garden thrive. Light mulch will help capture rain water, suppress weeds and encourage deep root growth. Water deeply once a week to encourage more drought-tolerant roots. Use soaker and drip hoses to minimize water loss through evaporation. If possible, capture water from downspouts with rain barrels.

Is it safe to use Impatiens again?

Unfortunately, the fungus-like disease which decimates Impatiens plants with the symptoms of downy mildew has not been fully brought under control by the new treatments and continues as a threat. Acer Gardens recommends substituting New Guinea Impatiens or the new Bounce series of Impatiens plants.

The nursery has grown a wide selection of colors of both. Other plants which do well in shade include Begonias, Coleus, Lobelias and Torenia.

When can my houseplants go outside?

As the weather begins to warm, many gardeners itch to get their houseplants outside for the summer. A good rule of thumb is to wait until nighttime temperatures are consistently above 60 degrees. Many houseplants are native to tropical or sub-tropical climates and will need time to adapt to a new environment.

Before your plant goes outside check to see if it needs re-potting into the next larger pot size. This is also a good time to see if your plants need light pruning or reshaping. Add a little fresh potting mix to each plant as some of its soil will have decomposed over the winter. When the plants go outside, place them in a partially shaded spot for at least 10 days. Once they have adjusted to more light, the plants can be moved to a sunny location in the garden or on the patio. You may need to water the plants daily and change your fertilizing schedule. It's a good idea to inspect the houseplants periodically in case bugs or insects are causing problems.

Garden Help

The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station will answer inquiries on lawn problems (860 683-4977), soil testing (203 974-8521) and plant disease issues.(203 974-8601.)

General Reminder

Tuesday at Acer Gardens are 60+ Discount Days ... 10% off all purchases.

Wednesday offers a 10% Nursery Discount to all customers.

Acer Gardens
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