



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Helpful Garden Tips for March 2024 (February 3, 2024)

by Peyton Ellas, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener



Will March be rainy, frosty, windy, sunny, snowy, or all of the above? That would be normal. Spring is in the air, but we could have reminders of winter and hints of summer all month. Then again, we could have endless warm days and cool nights. That is all typical of spring in the foothills, mountains, and valleys of California. With all the precipitation we've received, expect abundant growth, especially in our California native plants, and lots of flowers.

PLANTING: Spring is the second season of major planting. You can plant all varieties of trees, shrubs, perennials, ground covers, and vines. In the edible garden, plant heat-lovers like cucumber, tomato, melon, beans, eggplant, and squash towards the end of the month. You can also plant potatoes, radishes, chives, greens, beets, and herbs of all types. Citrus, avocado, and other frost-sensitives should also be planted late in the month to avoid late-frost damage.

When buying citrus, please be sure to buy from a reputable Tulare or Kings County nursery so we don't spread the Asian citrus psyllid. That means saying "no" to the neighbor or family member who has an extra citrus tree for you, and that means not bringing citrus trees into the county from elsewhere in the State. There are regulations about the movement of bulk quantities of citrus fruit to save the California citrus industry, much of which is in our counties. You can find out more from the CDFA website or read the University of California Pest Note at <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74155.html>.

Many plants, native and non, bloom profusely in March. If you need quick color, plant ageratum, alyssum, bachelor buttons, begonias, celosia, cleome, coleus, cosmos, duster miller, gomphrena, inpatients, lobelia, marigolds, nasturtiums, nicotiana, petunias, portulacas, salvias and verbena. It is also the month to start planting summer blooming bulbs such as cannas, calla lily, crocosmia, dahlia, gladiolus, Liatris, lilies, ranunculus, tuberose, and zephyranthes.



MAINTAINING: Along with bursts of flowers and foliage, March also begins the major insect season. Monitor for common spring insect pests like aphids, earwigs, slugs, snails, whiteflies, thrips, and codling moth worms. Handpicking or spraying with a strong stream of water is the least toxic option. Ornamental plants can often withstand up to moderate infestation from these insect pests, but in the vegetable and fruit garden, tolerate only small populations and lend a helping hand if the beneficial insects can't reduce the number of pests within a few days.

If you must use pesticides, identify your pest first. Many a beneficial insect has been killed because of haste to destroy all insect life in the garden. Some common beneficials that are often mistaken for pests are lacewing, syrphid flies, spiders, parasitic mites, and parasitic wasps. Read more about biological controls for insect pests at <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74140.html>.

Handpicking large insects is easier on the garden and the ecology. Using traps like rolled-up newspapers or boards is another way to catch and remove insect pests like snails, slugs, and earwigs.

If you must use chemicals for slugs and snails, use baits containing iron phosphate, which is not toxic to children, wildlife, or pets. Baits containing metaldehyde are extremely toxic. Tolerate some plant damage,

especially from caterpillars and especially on your ornamental (non-edible) plants. Think of them as the pretty butterflies and moths they will become. Bugs are also a major food source for nesting and hatching birds and for other bugs, toads, lizards, and small mammals.

Start setting baits out now for Argentine and other non-native ants and rotate the chemical every three months. Eliminating ants will help control soft-bodied insects like aphids.

Spittlebugs are occasionally an unsightly nuisance but do little damage and don't stay long. They look like little blobs of wet foam on foliage. They seem to prefer rosemary and sage. If you can't stand it, a strong blast of water can dislodge them.

Water your new transplants well and keep them from completely drying out. During active growth is not the season to try to make your plants tolerate drought. Let the top of the soil dry out a little in between waterings, and then soak the rootball thoroughly. They are growing roots, which will help them withstand the stress of the dry and hot months to come.

March is also a good month to fertilize roses. Use a specialty fertilizer meant for roses and do two smaller feedings instead of one. You can also fertilize non-native perennials and established citrus trees that are emerging from dormancy. Your California native plants don't need fertilizer, although you could give your acid-loving manzanita a weak dose of fertilizer labeled for camellias, azaleas, and magnolias.

Weed control is in high gear. Cool-season grasses have seeds; warm-season weeds are blooming. Whether you use mechanical, chemical, or a mix of control methods, remember weeds are trying to protect the earth's crust by reducing erosion. If you clear an area of weeds, what will replace these plants? Use rock, bark, or living mulch (ground cover plants) to keep the soil on your property. When spraying herbicide, remember that many of your plants, including roses and California native species, are highly susceptible to damage from small amounts of drift, and you may not see that damage immediately. Follow label directions and protect desirable plants.

CONSERVING: While planting for spring, include at least one plant that increases the garden's diversity and usefulness for pollinators and/or other wildlife. Matching a plant with your soil and climate (including water availability) ensures fewer pests and less maintenance. If you want to try milkweed for the Monarchs, search out the native varieties, such as "narrow leaf."

If you haven't already done so, check your drip and sprinkler systems, clean filters, check for leaks, and make needed improvements. Get ready for summer. Make sure your system is as efficient as possible. You may consider upgrading to a "smart" controller that can better adjust to the weather and water needs of the garden. I've tried several of them now, and most of them are reliable, affordable, and easy to use with a smartphone app. You still should check your system periodically to make sure there are no leaks or other problems.

With all this work, it's also important to remember to take time to enjoy the garden's bounty. Don't be afraid to leave work for another day and just read a book in the sun or shade or watch the busy activity of your California garden in spring. For many gardens, this is their Glory season. Be sure to take time to celebrate the beauty you work hard to create in partnership with plants and many creatures!

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot

March 2 - STEAM Expo, TCOE Center, 6200 S. Mooney Blvd., Visalia, 9:30 am - 3:30 pm
March 2 - Ace Plant Clinic, 2230 W Walnut, Visalia - 10 am - 1 pm

March 9 - Luis Nursery Plant Clinic, Caldwell & Mariposa, Visalia - 10 am - 2 pm

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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