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May Diary 2012



The lovely month of May often brings rather balanced and very good gardening weather right around the world. It brings the glories of High Spring to the Northern Hemisphere and often ushers in the early days of summer.

While May represents Late Autumn in New Zealand and is often a lovely time to be outdoors. There's a golden glow to the sunlight. And it has still got some warmth to it, especially in sheltered corners.

Temperatures are refreshingly cool and crisp but warm enough to sustain subtropical growth and flowering in mild climates. Cymbidium and other cool season orchids and zygocactus make their early appearances.

While also the spring-like warmth encourages strong growth and the early blooms on winter flowers. The air is clean and fresh often with evening frosts, so cold weather bulbs like crocus, cyclamen, hyacinth and paper white narcissus, nerines and fothergilla often burst into bloom.

The May climate also brings out the best colours in the autumnal glory of colourful and ornamental leaves! When put together in one landscape, this is the time when representative blooms of all four seasons merge and blend to create a brief but most distinctive Fifth Season.

Leaves = Money in the Soil Bank:

Late autumn leaves can be so spectacular! But once they have fallen what do you do with them all? If bagged and removed, you have lost valuable minerals from the soil that grew the tree, which must be replaced with costly fertilisers else the land will eventually become depleted resulting in weakened and possibly diseased growth.

Burning leaves only produces about 5% of their total bulk in available potash and minerals while almost everything else in this valuable resource simply goes up in smoke.

Composting is the best solution, as it recycles them all into compost, i.e. enriched earth; putting back into the land exactly what was taken out of it that produced the leaves in the first place. It is like starting and

adding to a savings account for the garden's future.

If you haven't started your compost pile now is the time (see the April Diary for more details).

Rotted leaves are perhaps the best source of rich garden compost to replenish the soil for your spring garden. Leaves are highly rich in almost all the minerals needed for healthy growth in plants.

Once fully decomposed, these minerals now trapped in the enriched compost are released slowly through rainfall or watering so they are returned naturally to the soil where they came from to start the life cycle once again.

A Time to Clean, Tidy and Plan Ahead:

As the warm season garden fades, clean up all the garden beds removing all weeds and debris that could harbour noxious seed, pests or disease if allowed to remain there through the winter months.

If the garden debris was healthy, cut or shred it and either allow it to fall back onto the land where it came from to replenish the soil or remove it to the compost pile along with the leaves. Wherever disease has been a problem, the diseased debris is best burnt to destroy all pathogens once and for all.

If that is not possible, then bag it all and if possible allow the contents to heat up enough to kill any pathogens before removing it for recycling elsewhere. That way you are not spreading disease and pests any further a field.

Soil Preparation:

Once the garden beds are cleared this is the best time to start soil preparations for the planting seasons ahead.

In cold districts, where hard frosts can now become commonplace, and the land is to remain fallow until spring, now is the time to roughly turn the land, and leave it to break down over the winter months. Exposure to the elements will kill off most pests, disease and weed seed.

Throughout the winter, whenever weather permits, occasionally fork over and turn the land to further sterilise the soil in preparation of spring planting. Many gardeners spread compost or well aged manures over the soil and roughly turn them in at the same time so they can naturally break down through the winter months.

This also allows much of the weed seed contained in the compost or manure to freeze or sprout where it can be quickly turned under.

In the winterless north and other sheltered microclimates, now is a good time to plant advanced seedlings for an almost immediate winter garden display. And there is still time to sow seed for the spring and summer gardens and beyond that.

First spread manure and compost over the cleared land then (optionally) dust over this with a complete general plant food, blood and bone and lime. Then turn the soil thoroughly, digging this mixture in, water in well and let stand to cure for at least a week

before replanting. If you wish a really good display from winter and spring flowering annuals consider adding extra drainage material to counteract the effects of possible prolonged wintry wet spells.

This is very important if the garden soil is at all heavy or water-retentive. Gardeners living in areas with heavy winter rainfall often first dig in the drainage material deeply then add all the fertilisers and dig them in only lightly into the top 10-15cm of soil, watering them in and then allow the soil to cure as normal.

The winter rainfall does the rest, gradually washing the fertilisers deeper into the soil where they become available to the plant's roots.

It is possible to feed the land and turn it; then plant the same day and afterward water everything in generously. The risk here is that as the fresh additives break down in the first week or so, their electrolytic effects on the soil can sometimes interfere with growth and development of the tender seedlings. But with experience it is easy to do the whole thing in one operation and be done with it.

Autumn Pruning Secret for Clearing

Land:

This is a very good month to cut down, remove or clear land of trees, shrubs and brush.

As winter approaches the sap of most trees and shrubs starts to return to the roots and the plants become dormant until spring. If

cut down now while the sap is running back into the roots, air is often drawn down through the wound by capillary action causing the trunk or branch to dry out and die. To enhance this dieback, the wound can be liberally painted with salt, kerosene, mineral turpentine, or an appropriate herbicide which is then drawn down into the trunk and root system.

This effect is strongest after the Late Autumn Full Moon has passed and especially during the Last Quarter 'Dark' Moon or whenever the Moon is below the horizon so that the Moon and Earth's gravitational pull combines to make the strongest downward pull upon the plant.

Pruning Tip:

For this same reason it is not recommended to prune deciduous trees right at leaf fall (sap run) to minimise the possibility that air will be pulled into the fresh cut and through capillary action be drawn down the stem, causing the loss of more wood than had been intended. It's better to prune a few weeks before leaf fall or during the long winter dormant season ahead.

Plan for Winter Now:

Killing frosts and wintry weather will arrive in all but the most sheltered spots by the end of the month. Plan and prepare for it now and avoid being caught out!

- *Move all cold-sensitive plants to shelter.
- *Drain hoses against freezing.
- *Clear gutters of leaves and make sure they are all free-flowing; repairing any leaks at the same time.