



MARCH IN THE GARDEN

By **Russell Jordan**



Things really begin to get going in the garden this month. Lengthening days, with the vernal equinox being on the 20th of March, and gradually rising temperatures bring on an exponential increase in plant growth as they are coaxed out of winter dormancy. Spring flowering bulbs will be coming into their own as blooming harbingers of the early flowering perennials, such as *Pulmonaria* and *Primula*, which make a good accompaniment to them at the fringes of your beds and borders. Towards the back of a mixed border, you may have some of the earlier flowering shrubs, such as *Ribes*, *Camellia* and *Pieris*, which are most welcome for adding interest before the bulk of spring flowering stalwarts get into their stride.

With the number of gardening days lost, so far, this year due to the almost incessant rain, you may not have got all of your bare-rooted stock planted into their final positions. March is probably the last month for planting them, before they are fully into leaf, and the fact that the ground is unlikely to be short of water means that they will have a chance to send out new roots before they are going to need supplementary irrigation.

Waterlogged soil may also have kept you off garden beds and borders, to complete the necessary cutting back, weeding and tidying, before herbaceous perennials start into growth. If it remains wet, and you simply must get on with border work, then investing in some broad planks, 'duck boards', will allow you to move across the soil with the boards spreading your weight and reducing the need to fork and aerate the ground that you've just trodden on. The problem with repeatedly delaying gardening tasks, in the hope for 'ideal weather', is that, especially in the spring, there comes a point when absolutely everything needs to be done at once!

At least wet days give you the excuse to retire to the greenhouse, or whatever protected growing space you have, to sow seeds such as bedding plants, hardy annuals and perennials that you want to plant *en masse*. In theory, hardy annuals can be directly sown outdoors, towards the end of the month, but, especially in these days of 'chemical free' gardening, sowing them into multi-cell modules, planting out in

a few weeks' time, gives them a better chance of not being decimated by slugs and snails.

If you have been overwintering dahlia tubers in your greenhouse then now is a good time to start thinking about nudging them towards breaking dormancy. I keep them dry and soil-less, as long as they are in frost-free storage, because I find them less prone to rots and soil borne diseases this way. It's rising temperatures, in addition to increasing moisture, which brings them back into growth so, if sunshine raises the greenhouse temperature as early as March, I'll start potting up the dormant tubers into moderately damp compost. Many dahlias make massive 'knots' of new tubers, if the summer is kind to them, and you can carefully cut off a few individual new tubers, to make new plants, when potting them up in the spring.

Similar to dahlias, if you have tender perennials overwintering in your frost-free space, I mentioned last month that they should be checked for signs of life and possibly watered to encourage new growth. This process can continue this month and, if the tender perennial was overwintered as a rooted cutting rather than as a 'stock' plant, it should be potted into a pot the next size up so that the roots have fresh, nutrient rich, compost to expand into. They can't be planted outside until all risk of frost has passed, which could be well into May during some years, but growing them to as large a specimen as possible, under protection, ensures the best display for the whole of the summer. It's worth investing in something like 'horticultural fleece' for that interim period when you've taken them out of the greenhouse, but they then need some protection from an unexpected overnight frost.

Now is a good time to buy and plant practically anything that is available as a container grown plant. In the case of herbaceous perennials, early spring is a good time to life and divide them to make new plants and, similarly, if you buy a large specimen, from a garden centre or nursery, you can probably divide it into at least three plants before adding it to your garden. When planting new plants, and also when generally weeding and tidying herbaceous borders,

adding a general 'feed', I've always used 'blood, fish and bone', helps to boost the plants just when they need it most.

If you have specimens of *Cornus*, *Salix* or *Rubus* grown for their colourful winter stems then, on established plants, these need to be stooled (cut almost to the ground) before they start into growth any time around now. This helps to intensify the winter colour and, especially in the case of *Rubus*, ornamental brambles, keeps them to a manageable size. They should also be fed (see previous paragraph) and mulched, after stooling, in order to promote good, vigorous, regrowth as this provides next winter's show of colour. I've mentioned it many times before but it's really difficult not to be stopped in your tracks by the appearance of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire', setting the border ablaze when lit by the winter sun at the end of the day.

I almost don't want to even think about the lawn right now. It's completely waterlogged and there's no way that I could get the mower onto it. Assuming that conditions improve in March then there's a chance that it will require its first cut. If this is the case, then the mower blades should be raised to a notch above the summer cutting height (with any luck you'll have had a chance to sharpen them and service the mower over the winter) for at least the first few cuts. Mowing the lawn when it is completely sodden will cause more harm than good, so this is definitely a case when you need to wait for 'ideal' conditions. Lawn repair and reinstatement is certainly something that can wait for when the grass is fully back into growth. There's more than enough to be getting on with this month without worrying about turf management!

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