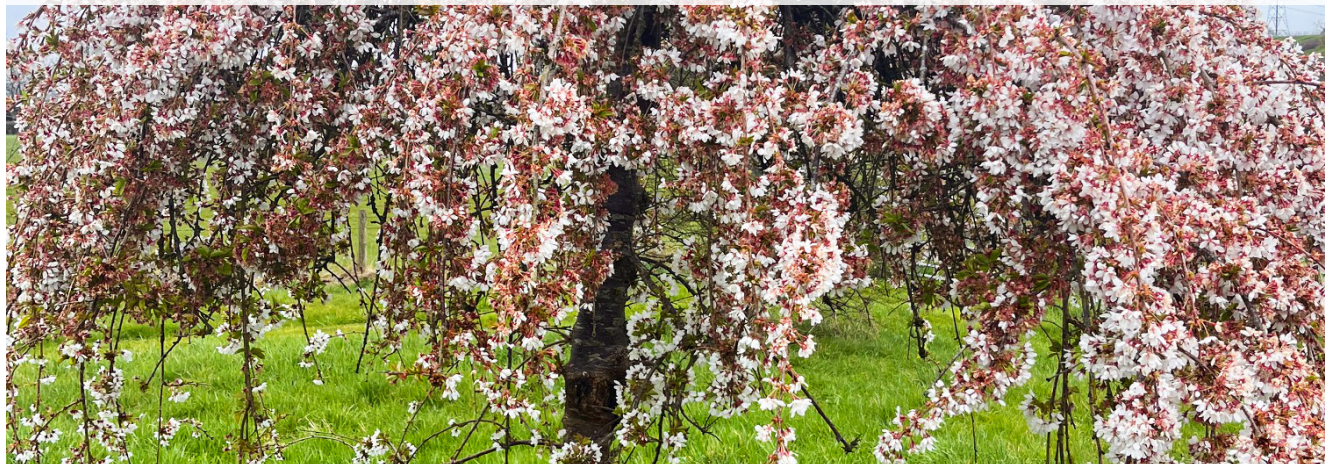




## APRIL IN THE GARDEN

By **Russell Jordan**



**T**he month which gave its name to a certain meteorological occurrence; ‘April Showers’. The kind of rainfall whereby we get an otherwise nice day, probably fairly sunny, and then a good dollop of rain that seems to come from nowhere. Traditionally, the risk posed by a heavy downpour is the reason why creating a new lawn by sowing grass seed, rather than laying turf, is best avoided at this time of year. I guess this is true if the deluge is so severe that excessive run-off destroys the entire seedbed but, otherwise, having a mixture of sunshine and showers is pretty conducive to plant growth. Needless to say, spring is well under way this month, with leaves and blooms bursting out all over.

It’s not just heavy showers that may disrupt your gardening activities in April; cold weather, snow and frosts can still throw spanners in the works so it’s worth having some protective measures to hand. If sub-zero temperatures are forecast, then anything newly planted can quickly be protected with a blanket of horticultural fleece or cloches placed over them. It’s good to get a bit of a head start by direct sowing hardy annuals where you want them to flower and, even though they are described as ‘hardy’, these are best protected from frost at least until they are better established. It’s always a bit of a balancing act when it comes to sowing things outside nice and early, risking a check to growth, and leaving it until later which may mean missing some potential flowering period.

Don’t be tempted to plant out properly tender specimens, however tempting they may be, fresh from the garden centre or having nurtured them all winter in your own greenhouse, until we’ve had the ‘last frost’. This is one of those perennial (excuse the pun!)

horticultural peculiarities as, by definition, we never actually know when we’ve had the ‘last frost’—except in hindsight. Having said that, there is a ‘last frost date finder’, on the internet, which provides you with the necessary data, for any given location, so that you can, at least, make an educated guess.

On the subject of seed sowing, a lot of plants which are described as needing to be sown, with heat, in ‘Feb-Mar’ can still be started off now and there is the advantage that they’ll need less supplementary heating and lighting at this time of year. They should, practically, catch up with earlier sowings by the time summer is upon us. A lot of these, generally bedding and hanging basket type plants, are widely available as little plug plants, in garden centres or sent via the mail, and this option is a good way of avoiding some of the pitfalls of raising them from seed, especially if you have limited greenhouse or windowsill space.

If you did get sowing as early as February or March, there will be plenty of ‘pricking out’ and ‘potting on’ to be getting on with in the greenhouse / windowsill area. If you have opted for the plug plant option, then you will also save yourself the time and trouble of all the fiddly pricking out and initial potting up stages. There is so much starting to happen in the garden, at this time of year, that anything that saves a bit of time and hassle is a bonus.

Amongst the numerous tasks that begin to become necessary, at this point of the growing season, is dealing with the very earliest of the spring flowering bulbs. Spent flowers on early narcissi (daffodils) and tulips should be removed and, in order to promote flowers for next spring, a handful of ‘fish, blood and bone’, or other general fertiliser, gently forked into

the soil around the bulbs. This process can continue with the later blooming spring bulbs, as their petals fall but while they are still in leaf.

Bulbs naturalised in turf cannot really be fed in this way as it would just encourage excess grass growth and not really feed the bulbs. The kind of bulbs which survive in lawns are those which do not need feeding in order to produce blooms every year; *Narcissus bulbocodium*, *N. obvallaris*, *N. pseudonarcissus*, *Crocus tommasinianus*, *Fritillaria meleagris* (Snake's Head Fritillary) *et al.* Remember that any lawn which has spring bulbs planted in it will need to be left uncut for at least six weeks after the bulbs have bloomed so it's most suited to wilder areas of the garden, or to dedicated wildflower areas—something that neatly dovetails with the ongoing trend for 'No Mow May'.

Now, after the 'bare-root planting period' has passed but while there is still a good amount of moisture in the soil, is generally considered the ideal time to plant conifers or to transplant evergreen shrubs. They establish best when they are just starting into growth, after the winter cold, but when they will not get droughted. This is because, unlike deciduous specimens, they are always losing moisture from their leaves so they don't want to be disturbed when the ground is too cold, especially if it gets frozen, as they won't be able to take up water and yet they'll still be losing it via their foliage. Leaving it until later in the year runs the risk of them losing more moisture, in hot weather, than their, not yet established, roots can supply. Whenever they are planted, or moved, they will need a good 'watering in' and then supplementary irrigation for at least the first growing season.

Herbaceous planting, of potted material, can continue this month but it's getting a bit late to dig up and divide established border plants as they should be well into growth by now. Before they get any taller, it's a timely task to insert any plant support system that they'll need to prevent future flopping. Pea sticks (hopefully the ever handy 'Groves' still stock these) are the preferred option because, once woven around and over the extending growth, they become almost invisible and, of course, they are a green and sustainable product. If you have room in your own garden, it might be worth planting a small coppice of hazel trees for you to cut your own pea sticks every winter. Another choice is to keep plant supports in mind every time you prune any large shrub. Put the prunings aside, somewhere out of sight, if you think they have any potential use as alternative pea sticks.

I think that's enough to be getting on with. Remember to keep on feeding and mulching beds and borders, if you can still get onto any area of bare soil. The earliest flowering shrubs should have their flowered stems pruned out, in order to reinvigorate them, and this process continues as shrubs finish flowering in succession. This only needs doing once the shrub has filled its allotted space; newly planted specimens will need a few years, depending on their rate of growth, before rejuvenation pruning is required.

I probably should be warning you about the longer days, warming temperatures and general 'bursting into life', means that you also need to keep on top of weeding, pest and disease control—but I'm hoping that kind of stuff is becoming second nature to you!

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