

# H O M E

spring

## and Garden

## Digging in the dirt

*A master gardener's primer on how to get your garden started this spring*

By SHANTAL PARRIS RILEY  
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It's spring. Now is the time to start preparing the soil for your garden. You don't have to be a genius to grow flowers or vegetables, but following a few key points of advice can mean the difference between raising your own small patch of heaven and tilling an exercise in horticultural frustration.

Start off by observing a few common sense rules.

First, pick a site that will work, not only for the plants but for you, said Orange County Cornell Cooperative Extension Horticulturist Debbie Lester. "You want to make sure that it gets at least six hours of direct sun per day," she said, noting that vegetables, in general, like a lot of sun, but shade-loving flowers and plants like impatiens and hosta do not need as much.

Lester said to make sure the soil is capable of draining itself of water. "You want to make sure that it's well drained," she said. "Usually you'll see standing water after a heavy rain, which should drain in between 24 and 48 hours."

Make sure the garden or flower bed is somewhere close to a water source, so as to avoid needing to do extra work come watering time, said Lester.

Once a suitable location has been chosen for the garden, the soil needs to be tested. "Check your pH levels and even the existing nutrient levels to see if there's anything that needs correcting," said Lester. "If the pH is out of whack, certain nutrients aren't available or become over abundant."

The pH level is a measure of soil alkalinity (sweetness) and acidity (sourness). A pH level of 7.0 is considered neutral. Lower than 7.0 is considered acidic. Higher is considered alkaline. Certain plants like certain soils. Rhododendrons and blueberries, for example, love acidic soil, while geraniums and lilac shrubs don't, said Lester.

Soil testing kits can be purchased for relatively cheap at most gardening centers. Some will also test for levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, which are important nutrients for plant growth and development.

Lester suggests bringing a soil sample in to the Cornell Cooperative Extension office. Cornell will provide a pH test and a detailed nutrient analysis, free of charge. The process takes about two weeks, she said.

If your soil's pH is too high or low, it can and should be amended by adding lime to acidic soil – and sulphur to alkaline soil. Soil may also be improved by adding organic compost and horse manure, which, Lester said, contain healthy microorganisms and improve the overall texture of the soil.

But, be careful! To be safe, both compost and horse manure should

*Continued on page 3*





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# Digging in the dirt

*Continued from page 1*

be aged a year, said Lester. Raw compost, she said, especially raw horse manure, will burn plants, with the potential to kill them outright. Fold well-rotted compost and manure in as you till your soil to just under a foot in depth with a shovel, fork, spade or roto-tiller, and then level off.

Last year, late blight, the disease responsible for the Irish Potato Famine, devastated tomato and potato crops across the eastern states, including New York. Lester said that after gardeners destroyed diseased plants, they should have also disposed of any plant parts left in the ground.

"It does over winter on live plant tissue, mostly potato tubers left in the ground," said Lester. "They should be removed as soon as possible."

While daytime temperatures have been warm, temperatures at night are still chilly. So, there is a risk that anything you plant now may be exposed to frost. "In our area, the average frost date is May 20, but we could still have a frost give or take 10 days on either side of it," said Lester.

(A traditional rule of thumb for the Orange County region, which extends across USDA Hardiness Zones five and six, is to begin planting after Memorial Day.)

If you can't wait, cool weather crops will tolerate the cooler nighttime temperatures. They include peas, spinach, lettuce, broccoli and cauliflower, as well as annuals like pansies and perennials like Black-eyed Susan and tiger lilies.

For beginner gardeners, Lester said not to start too big. "You want to make sure that you can start small enough that you can take care of it," she said.

Planning ahead can help. Lester suggests to plot a map of your garden, noting the height, spacing and position of the sunlight, among other details. "The seed packets will tell you the spacing or it may say after germination to thin to a certain point, so you get the proper spacing," she said. "Pay attention to mature sizes of plants, so you're not planting them too closely together."

There is always the option of starting your plants indoors. Lester said to count backwards from the time when the plants can be safely placed in the ground. "If you can plant it in mid-May, you don't want to start it now," she said, adding that most seedlings only need a few weeks of indoor growing time.

When the plants are finally in the soil, they will need watering. "When you water, a tip is to water early in the day, generally in the morning," she said. "So when the sun comes out and the air starts moving, the plants dry quickly. That will help to prevent disease."

Don't over water! Lester said that this is one of the most common sins committed by beginner gardeners. "One of the things that kills plants quickest is over watering," she said, explaining that as a general rule, most flowers do not require as much watering as vegetable plants.

Lester and a host of Orange County master gardeners are available on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. to answer your gardening questions on Cornell's garden helpline at 343-0664. Questions may also be emailed to [mghelpline@cornell.edu](mailto:mghelpline@cornell.edu).

To learn more tips on caring for your garden, visit the Cornell University Gardening resources web site at [www.gardening.cornell.edu](http://www.gardening.cornell.edu).

**hvgardencalendar.com has over 100**

## Hudson Valley garden events scheduled

Hudson Valley, NY – Local gardener, Laura Wilson, recently launched a new website Hudson Valley Garden Calendar ([hvgardencalendar.com](http://hvgardencalendar.com)). The site is for garden-lovers looking for garden related events in the Mid-Hudson Valley. Listings include classes, tours, plant sales, nursery events, garden club meetings and volunteer opportunities.

Hudson Valley Garden Calendar showcases information about garden events and helps promote the gardens, organizations and nurseries within the local gardening community. Events span the entire calendar year and are updated regularly with information compiled from over forty sources. Wilson hopes that the organizations and businesses hosting the events benefit from the website, and begin to use it as a promotional tool. Event listings are free.

"The response from the organizers and nursery owners has been extremely positive. Every other email I receive begins with 'Thank You.'" - Laura Wilson, creator of Hudson Valley Garden Calendar

Hudson Valley Garden Calendar was designed to be used, not just looked at. Users can share their experiences in comment areas, add events to Google Calendar or iCal and subscribe to the RSS feed for weekly updates and reminders.

The idea for Hudson Valley Garden Calendar was the result of Wilson's annual lists of garden events she made for her own use, combined with a desire to make a garden-related contribution to the local community.

"I've known for some time that I wanted to make some kind of contribution to local gardening. I just wasn't sure what - or how. This winter the idea just clicked for me, and the more I thought about it the more excited I got." - Laura Wilson, creator of Hudson Valley Garden Calendar

As of early April there were over 170 events posted on Hudson Valley Garden Calendar and only four weeks without listings, and the season has barely gotten started. If you have information about a gardening event you would like to share, email details to [laura.wilsongardens@gmail.com](mailto:laura.wilsongardens@gmail.com).

Local garden coach & designer, Laura Wilson, is a staff horticulturist at a private estate and studies landscape design at the New York Botanical Garden. She lectures locally and previously managed a local garden center.

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# Bug juice, garden recipes

By REGGIE MAHER

Here are some tried and true garden insect repellents that won't kill you or your wallet. Don't feel you need to kill every bug you see, unless it's on you or inside your house in which case all bets are off. Spiders, ladybugs, bees, praying mantis, moths and butterflies are all beneficial to the garden and will gladly eat many bad bugs for you. I wash out old spray bottles and reuse them for these bug sprays. Although none of these recipes are toxic, it's best to relabel the bottle every time.

### APHID POTION

You'll know when your plant has aphids because it will look like it's covered with mini chocolate sprinkles. Aphids suck the life out of plants and the leaves will soon wilt and curl up. They don't always kill a whole plant, but they will give it a run for its life.

Try to deal with aphids as soon as you notice them so they don't overwhelm your garden. As soon as I notice them I like to blast them with the hose, releases my aphid anger, and you'll have less bugs to spray too. You may have to hose them off and use the spray below a couple of times and then repeat the process after the eggs hatch.

Mix together in a spray bottle  
Equal parts water and rubbing alcohol  
squirt of liquid dish washing soap (this helps the spray to stay put)

### JAPANESE BEETLES

It's simply best to hand pick them early in the morning (when they are sleepy and easy to catch) and drop them in a jar of soapy water. Do this every morning and early evening if necessary until they are gone, usually takes a week or two. Periodically empty

the dead beetle jar as far away from civilization as you can - they smell really nasty after a few days. Since Japanese beetles are the adult form of grubs (those ugly white wormy curls in the lawn) you might consider getting rid of the grubs in the ground, this will reduce the beetle population later in the season. Milky spore bacteria and beneficial nematodes are 2 natural products that destroy grubs. You just spread it around the yard - its available at nurseries. Whatever you choose to do don't use those Japanese beetle traps they sell, it attracts them by the hundreds to your yard and they will inevitably eat everything.

### SLUGS

Slugs are party animals and they love a good dip in the old brew. Bury a peanut butter or mayonnaise jar lid in the dirt, make it level with the ground, then fill it with beer. Put it under the plants getting slugged and you will find the lid full in the morning. Yum! Once you get rid of them keep them away with a ring of pennies around the base of your hosta.

### ANTS

Sprinkle cinnamon or equal parts boric acid and sugar around base of house & garage as well as entrance door ways, ant hills and trails.

### ANT BAIT TRAP

1/2 cup honey

6 tbs sugar

6 tbs active dry yeast

Mix ingredients and spread onto a piece of bread, a strip of wax paper or plastic and lay it in the path of the ants.

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## The wood or composite decking choice

Billed as low-maintenance and attractive solutions for the yard, vinyl or composite decks have become the materials of choice for more homeowners in recent years. They're supposed to last longer and require less maintenance than wood counterparts. But how do composite materials really stack up against wood?

### RESISTANCE

No decking product is completely indestructible. Both composite and wood decks can warp, fade or be scratched and dinged.

Wood decks may have the advantage over composite materials in this arena simply because of their ability to be refinished. The same options are not available with composite materials.

### DURABILITY

Composite decks, those made of vinyl, plastic, polypropylene, polyethylene, or a combination of plastic and wood pulp would seem to be more durable than wood decks.

It's true that composite products resist weather-related damage better. However, a relatively high rate of expansion and contraction can cause composite decks to warp and hardware to loosen.

### MAINTENANCE

Composite decks will require considerably less seasonal maintenance than wood decks. Manufacturers recommend certain cleaning and tightening of joint spacing to avoid sagging. However, certain building codes require composite decks be built

upon wood structural supports, so a composite deck could have some wood material after all.

Wood decks require routine staining, cleaning, sanding, etc. Which is why many homeowners seek options in composite decking.

### 'GREEN' FACTOR

There are supporters and detractors to both wood and composite decks in terms of environmental impact. Wood decks seemingly are harmful to the environment because of the harvesting of wood and depletion of forests, but forests can be replanted. Composite decks are made from plastics, which do not decompose easily when disposed of.

Both wood and composite decks require many chemicals for cleaning and other maintenance, which can seep into the ground and leach into water supplies.

### HEAT FACTOR

Homeowners may be concerned with how hot the building material will be underfoot.

Wood tends to reflect the sunlight more readily than composite materials, particularly if the wood is light in color. Therefore it could be more comfortable to walk upon.

### APPEARANCE

Many composite materials come close to looking like wood, but they may still appear plastic. It's hard to improve upon the timeless and cozy appearance of wood environmental landscaping items.

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# Raised beds for a Healthier Garden

Spring is here at last! Most of us can't wait to shake off the winter blues, to get out into the sunshine, walk the dog, play catch with the kids or just take a stroll in the park. For homeowners, it's the first chance to work on the yard, restore a lush lawn and, for an increasing number of gardening aficionados, create a home vegetable garden. Inner city urbanites, even those with a postage stamp size yard, have been swept up by the 'grow



carbon footprint caused by trucking produce from the grower to the store.

It's nearly effortless to assemble a raised garden bed and easy to maintain with minimal weeding and back-breaking bending to water and maintain it -- a boon for seniors! Home vegetable growers control the quality of the soil, nutrients and other additives so veggies and fruits grown in a raised garden bed taste better, are healthier and cost much less than those from bought at the local market. Of course, the icing on the cake is the self-satisfaction and joy of serving up delicious tomatoes and veggies picked fresh from the garden.

Think vertically. Adding a trellis to a raised bed vegetable garden greatly increases the amount of vertical growing space and provides the needed support for cultivating squash, beans, tomatoes and other vines. As well as giving a viable option for those without a lot of space, a vertical growing system also pays numerous dividends to the garden itself. Plants on the vine enjoy greater air circulation and so are healthier and not as susceptible to disease.

Add compost and mulch to the garden. If weeds are a gardener's worst

enemy, compost and mulch might just be a gardener's best friend. Compost adds any number of microorganisms to the soil, strengthening a plant's roots and enabling it to pick up more nutrients in the process. Mulch, meanwhile, can help keep down harmful weeds, thereby reducing the competition a plant will have for valuable water and nutrients.

your own' movement.

Victory Gardens, first introduced by Eleanor Roosevelt during the Great War, were the original community raised gardens. People were encouraged to grow their own veggies in support of the war effort. Today, raised garden beds have replaced them as the eco-friendly solution for eating healthier without adding to the

## Bird Feeders of Many Shapes and Sizes

When it comes to spring and summer, many people associate certain sights and sounds with these warm weather seasons. Ocean waves crashing, luscious lawns glowing green and birds chirping are often associated with spring and summer.

While homeowners might not be able to bring the soothing sounds of the ocean to their homes, they can bring the lyrical sounds of birds chirping to their yards. Bird feeders make a wonderful addition to any lawn or garden, adding aesthetic appeal and bringing music to your ears. Choosing a bird feeder can depend on where you'll be hanging it. But whatever the layout of your property, bird feeders come in so many shapes and sizes that you're sure to find the right fit.

**Tray (platform):** These feeders are simply a big, open tray that's easy to fill and easy for birds to access seed. What's more, they can accommodate several birds at one time. Most birds will jump at the chance to feast at a tray feeder. There are some who will be reluctant, however, including doves, quail, sparrows and other ground feeders. However, they can certainly dine on any seed that gets spilled over.

**Hopper feeders:** These have plastic or glass enclosures that dole out seed as it is needed. This is a smart choice since seed isn't wasted and it's protected when not being eaten.

**Widow feeders:** Before storm windows and screened-in windows infiltrated modern society, birdseed was simply strewn out on an open window sill. You can still invite birds to your window with a window feeder that mounts like a window box. Or, there are models that simply suction to the window itself.

**Tube feeders:** These just may be the most efficient type of feeders out there. They're self-contained, the seed stays dry, and they hold a large amount of seed, making refilling an infrequent job. They also can feed a good number of birds at one time.

**Nectar feeders:** Some birds, like hummingbirds, orioles, house finches and some woodpeckers, prefer sweet nectar or sugar water over seed. Use a nectar feeder to satisfy their sweet tooth

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# Pruning Tips for Trees and Shrubs

Homeowners typically spend lots of time caring for their property. Be it a modest ranch house or a mansion on top of a hill, a home's outside appearance is often a point of pride for homeowners.

One commonly overlooked element of an aesthetically appealing home is the role trees can play. Trees can add an element of beauty to a yard while also playing a practical role, such as shading the grass from intense summer sun and acting as great support for hanging a hammock.

While trees can add appeal to a homeowner's property, they can also be an eyesore if not properly pruned. Homeowners hoping to get the most out of their trees should consider some pruning guidelines.

• **Fruit trees.** If the buds on a fruit tree have already started swelling, you've waited too long to prune. In general, fruit trees are best pruned in late winter or early spring. When pruning, be sure to remove all branches growing inward as well as limbs growing straight up.

• **Berry bushes.** Berry bushes are typically pruned in late fall or early winter, once you have finished harvesting the berries. When pruning berry bushes, keep in mind the importance of shape with respect to a berry bush's aesthetic appeal.

• **Rosebushes.** Rosebushes are generally best pruned in late winter, with early spring the latest possible cutoff

date. Remove any older shoots and leave between four and eight canes while removing any that are growing inward. When cutting them down, try to cut them to right around two feet above ground, and cut close to an inch above a bud or strong shoot.

• **Evergreen shrubs.** Evergreen shrubs won't flower, but they can be pruned after they have produced cones or shrubs. That typically occurs between late winter and early spring, so this can be done as the weather begins to warm up as part of your early season spring cleanup.

• **Evergreen trees.** In general, evergreen trees do not need to be pruned. It's generally obvious when an evergreen does need to be pruned, as the tree will be noticeably larger and in obvious need of pruning. Evergreens that do need to be pruned typically need it in late spring or early summer, and they will likely not grow much after a good pruning.

• **Deciduous trees.** Deciduous trees are generally only pruned for shaping. For those looking to shape, mid to late winter is the ideal time to do so.

• **Deciduous shrubs.** Mid to late spring is often the best time to prune deciduous shrubs. That's generally after they have flowered, and it will be obvious when they are in need of pruning, as they will likely have lots of unsightly branches evident to the naked eye.



## Improvements for First-Time Home Buyers

If you are one of the many people who have recently purchased your first home thanks to a government tax rebate incentive it's likely you'll want to improve your home to make it your own.

• **Install a tankless water heater.** Tankless water heaters heat water on demand -- as you need it. Therefore, you don't waste energy repeatedly heating 50 gallons of water to be stored in a tank. Electric models cost less, but gas ones tend to be more efficient.

• **Lay down a cool roof.** White or light-colored roofs will reflect sunlight and keep the house cooler in the process. This means you won't need to turn the air conditioning on as high.

• **Ask to use reclaimed wood.** If you're hiring out repair work or adding an addition, find out if you can use reclaimed wood. Reclaimed or salvaged lumber can be used for a variety of reasons, such as to build walls, as support beams, or in roof construction. Many companies specialize in obtaining building materials from older homes that are about to be torn down or dismantled.

• **Use low VOC paint.** One of the first improvements new homeowners generally make is changing wall colors. Traditional paint is high in volatile organic compounds, which can be hazardous to the environment and your health. Choose low-VOC paints and breathe easier. Most are comparable in price to other paints.

• **Use eco-friendly flooring.** Bamboo flooring is made from the highly renewable resource. Bamboo is actually a grass and grows very quickly and comes in a variety of colors, too. Other options are composite products, such as linoleum floors made from natural raw materials that are bound together with natural oils and resins.



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# Spring savings grow as the weather warms up

Saving money is a good idea no matter the season. But with warmer weather and longer days on the horizon, there is no better time to be penny-wise -- and have fun in the process. Here are some great ideas for making the most of the season -- and maybe even putting a little money away for a summer vacation.

Plant a vegetable garden. Spring is the time to get your garden going so that it will provide a bounty of fresh -- and inexpensive -- vegetables all summer long and into the fall as well. Optimal planting times vary by region. In the northwest, southeast and southwest, the best time to plant is generally April, while May is

generally best for planting gardens in the northeastern and central states.

Learn the art of canning: Extend the savings -- and enjoyment -- from your garden by preserving fruits and vegetables. While the process requires little in the way of equipment, it does require an understanding of the process and a commitment to cleanliness. But the results are definitely worth the effort.

Hold a yard sale. Whether you call it a yard sale, garage sale or tag sale, it's a surefire way to rid your home of unwanted items and make some extra money at the same time. Remember, since the secret to a successful yard sale is foot traffic, it

pays to advertise. In addition to putting up signs at well-traveled intersections in your neighborhood, it pays to spend a few dollars on a newspaper ad. Many local newspapers offer special garage sale rates

a boon to the environment and your bottom line. If you do not have an outdoor space to hang laundry, there are several types of indoor drying racks available, including space-saving models that are



and some even supply free signs and useful tips.

Invest in a crockpot or slow cooker. In addition to saving time, slow cookers are the frugal cook's best friends -- particularly during the spring and summer. Not only do they transform less expensive cuts of meat into tasty and tender meals, but they save energy because they keep kitchens cool even when the weather grows warm.

Drop your dryer. Air-drying laundry is

designed to be hung on a wall.

Alter kids' winter wardrobes. Here's a tip for handy parents with growing kids. Since kids will likely outgrow their current winter clothes by next year, parents can save a bundle by transforming long sleeves into short sleeves and pants into shorts. If you have a sewing machine and measure carefully, you can quickly create a warm-weather wardrobe for your kids without spending a dime.

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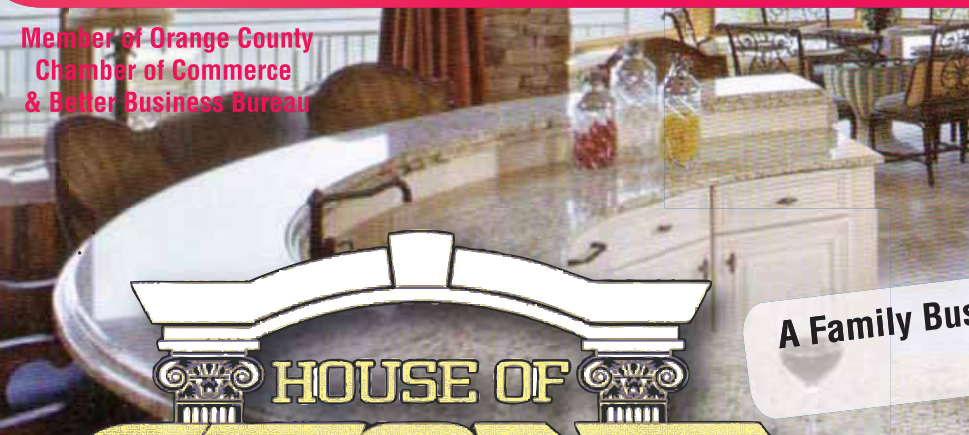
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