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Nursery & Greenhouse
15806 Best Road ▪ Mount Vernon, WA 98273
www.christiansonsnursery.com

The Garden in May

By Rachel Anderson, Certified Professional Horticulturalist

May in the garden is a wonderful thing! I long for this time when the new leaves of deciduous trees and shrubs are the perfect shade of spring, and even the shadows that they cast seem fuller and greener. There is a fresh lushness all around that I forget about over the long lean days of winter. Everything about this month feels like a celebration! There's new life, flowers, sunshine, renewed energy, and a sense of well being. It's no wonder that Mother's Day falls in May - what better time of year to honor our mothers and revel in the glory that is spring!

In the ornamental garden:

- Cut away last years fern fronds from your evergreen ferns. That way the graceful new fiddleheads are exposed when they are at their best.
- Dead head hellebores. Some varieties may still look pretty, but some of the earlier bloomers are beginning to look old and tattered. In my experience, aphids really like to congregate on the petals of old hellebore flowers, which is another good reason to get rid of them. Plus, deadheading shows off the glossy new foliage as well.
- Dead head your tulips that have finished blooming. Just like with daffodils, you don't want the plant to waste energy creating a seed. Instead, you want all that good energy to go towards feeding the bulb. Just let the foliage wither and brown right where it is, and later you'll easily be able to remove it.
- Keep on pulling weeds! If you haven't yet had a chance to spread a mulch for weed control and water conservation, you can still do so. However it becomes a little more difficult as most perennials have emerged by now and trees and shrubs have their leaves. It's easier when the ground is a clean slate, but later is better than never.
- Put out slugbait. Those slimy critters are out in force this time of year and once those hostas get nibbled you'll have to live with those holey leaves for the rest of the summer.
- On the subject of critters in the garden, it looks as though this is going to be a nasty year for tent caterpillars. You'll notice first their dense white webbing in trees and shrubs, and on closer inspection you'll see that nest teeming with wiggly brown worm-like creatures. It's really quite amazing, but as you're examining them just know that their sole purpose in life is to destroy your garden-seemingly overnight (at least, that's how I look at it). Quick action is called for. If it's possible, prune out the nests and dispose of them in the garbage, burn them, or if you have chickens, give them to the birds. If pruning them out isn't an option, there is a product called Bt that can be sprayed. It's an organic pesticide that is particularly effective against caterpillars of all sorts.
- Another critter to watch for: Aphids. All this tender succulent, new growth all around is too much for aphids to resist. Fortunately, they're pretty easy to deal with. Usually a strong stream of water will do the job, but there's also a product called Safer Soap, or insecticidal soap, that can be sprayed. There's also just hand squishing them, which is the fastest if not the grossest method.

- Deadhead early flowering rhodies. Some folks believe this helps the overall health of the plant, and others feel it makes no difference. It certainly makes it look prettier and I always do it if for no other reason than that. Of course, if your rhodie is one of those big, old, majestic beauties, then deadheading is unrealistic as it would take forever!
- It's finally okay to set out hanging baskets and mixed containers of annuals. Usually by Mother's Day is the rule of thumb in our region - the time when night temperatures are warm enough to not cause damage to tender plants (although, with basil, I would still be cautious).

In the edible garden:

- You've probably noticed that any brassicas (i.e. cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, and Brussels sprouts) that have overwintered in your garden are beginning to bolt or flower. If you have the space to allow them to bloom, then let them go. The bright yellow flowers are attractive to many pollinating insects that have emerged from a long winter and are looking for something to eat. Hummingbirds are also attracted to them. They're pretty, and you can eat them - they're a spicy and colorful addition to salad.
- It's still a good time to sow outdoors, especially veggies like peas, lettuce, kale, beets, chard, radishes, and arugula. It's also safe to sow beans and corn outside.
- Sow calendula, nasturtium, and sunflowers outside.
- By the end of May, thin your fruit trees. It's better to thin them when the fruit is still tiny. Choose the largest one per cluster and remove all else. This ensures good uniform size, helps to encourage air circulation around the fruit and thus helps to prevent scab and other issues. It also lessens the weight load for the branches to support.
- Set out starts of tomatoes, peppers, squash, eggplant, and basil with caution. Keep an eye on the weather, in particular the night time temperatures. Most summer veggies prefer temps at least in the 50's during the night in order to thrive. It doesn't take much to cause basil to wither and flowers to abort on tomatoes. If you're so fortunate as to have a greenhouse, then you're already on your merry way to homegrown tomatoes, but the rest of us could benefit from the use of cloches at night to protect our babies. (A cloche could be as simple as a gallon milk jug with the bottom cut out or as fancy as a tall graceful glass bell cloche).

There is a tradition I have and I'm not sure how it began. Perhaps it's from something in my childhood, picking flowers from my mother's gardens and giving them to anyone that cared (or sometimes, for those who didn't seem to care). Anyway, every year on May Day (May 1), I get up way too early and pick six bouquets from my garden, tie them up with ribbon, and deliver them in the wee hours to six random front stoops. I'd love to know what people's reactions are, as I believe they are probably mystified. But I hope my bouquets at least bring a smile to their faces and set them up to have a good day.

About the author:
Rachel has been gardening since childhood, thanks to her mom, and has been part of the team at Christianson's since 2002. She's a Certified Professional Horticulturist with a passion for roses and vegetable gardening. Rachel and her family enjoy gardening together and now share their urban garden with a menagerie of ducks, chickens, two cats, and a dog.

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