

The Carolina Country GARDEN



Spring: March - April - May

The Carolina Country GARDEN

An all-seasons guide for growing

By Hank Smith

Henry J. "Hank" Smith has advised Carolina Country gardeners since August 1983, making him the most senior of our contributors. He's not only outlasted everyone else, he's also maintained his popularity.

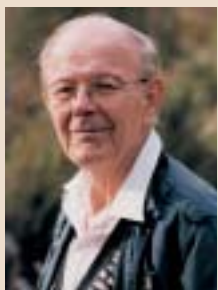


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"Hank's Gardening Guide" is among the best-read pages of this magazine. Hardly a month goes by without someone's asking us for Hank's phone number. (We don't reveal it, because Hank would be answering calls all day long.)

So we've assembled here a collection of Hank's gardening tips for year-round reference. While he considers the variances among North Carolina's regions, Hank advises gardeners to pay attention to the seasonal conditions affecting their own gardens.

A Florida native, Hank Smith was a staff member at North Carolina State University's Horticultural Science Department before becoming a fulltime consultant. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in horticultural science at the University of Florida. He served fellowships at Harvard and Penn State universities, worked as an Extension specialist at Mississippi State and was landscape editor for Southern Living magazine. He's hosted a weekly TV program, published many articles and photographs, and served as an advisor and officer to several horticultural societies.

Hank Smith is also popular among the residents of the Glenaire retirement community (2207 Fernglan Place, Cary, NC 27511), and he continues to lecture on horticulture when he can.

— The Editors

Garden Vegetables and Fruits

Cool-weather vegetable crops now being harvested should be followed by plantings of warm-weather ones like snap beans, squash, green beans, lima beans, okra, lettuce, tomatoes and beets.

When setting tomato and green pepper plants, place collars around the bases to protect from cutworms. Plastic cups with bottoms removed make good collars.

Stake tall-growing tomato plants, or place wire cages over them. As plants grow, secure them to the support with strips of sturdy cloth or discarded pantyhose.

Vegetables can be used as part of the flower garden. For example, carrots to edge a flowerbed (the foliage gives a fern-like edging); strawberries as a low-edging plant or groundcover; cabbages backed with zinnias, with petunias in front.

Plant green beans, cucumbers, squash and other warm season vegetables.

Remove blooms from herbs to direct plant energy to produce foliage, not flowers.

Trees and Shrubs

The first spring is a critical time for newly-planted shrubs and trees. Water them deeply once or twice a week during dry periods.

Most shrubs respond well to a general feeding of ¼- to ½-pound balanced plant food per square yard of area covered by plant. Do not permit fertilizer to touch stems or leaves. Distribute fertilizer evenly. If there is heavy mulch, or soil is badly packed, cultivate well. Water fertilizer into soil.

Remove faded blooms when they appear on bedding plants and shrubs.

Dig and transplant small seedlings of nandinas that have grown up under established plants. If established plants have grown tall and scraggly, cut away older, thicker stems at ground level.

Flowers

When Easter lilies are in bloom, pluck the stamens to remove yellow pollen as soon as it is visible. This prevents ripening pollen from discoloring petals, making flowers last longer.

Even shady spots can contribute summer color from annuals. The following endure somewhat heavy shade: petunia, balsam, calliopsis, godetia, lobelia, cockscomb, flowering tobacco, periwinkle and impatiens.

Good bedding plants for bright sunny spots: portulaca, zinnia, marigold, salvia and celosia.

Plant an evergreen vine such as English ivy or Carolina jasmine along with clematis vine. This provides a green camouflage when clematis is bare of leaves in winter.

Make massed plantings of zinnias, marigolds and petunias. These most popular of annuals contribute summer-long color accents.

For autumn color, set out chrysanthemums. Pinch their tips when plants are about six inches tall. This causes bushy plants and often increases flower production.

As blooms fade, cut daffodils, tulips and hyacinths if not done earlier. Since foliage is manufacturing food for next year's growth, let it remain until leaves mature and turn brown or yellow.

If daffodils multiply and become crowded clumps that produce little to no blooms, lift, divide and replant.



The Carolina Country GARDEN

Summer: June - July - August

When mums are ready for pinching back, the tip growth that is removed will root easily in coarse, damp sand. In three weeks, roots will have formed. By blooming time, these make good plants.

Lawn

Apply lawn-weed prevention to keep crabgrass seeds from sprouting and becoming summer weeds.

If large trees cast shade on the lawn and the shaded area is not planted with a groundcover, apply a complete fertilizer such as 6-12-12, 5-10-5, 8-8-8, or 12-6-6 at a rate of 30 to 35 pounds per 1,000 square feet. This relieves competition of trees and lawn grasses for nutrients.

Fertilize summer grasses such as Zoysia, Bermuda and Centipede. Do not fertilize fescue until fall.

Start groundcovers of lirioppe, Mondo grass and English ivy where grass refuses to grow.

Treatments

Five tablespoons of bleach in a gallon of water, shaken well, will help prolong the life of cut flowers. Keep the vase full of solution.

To attract hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies, include bee balm in flowerbeds.

Fertilize azaleas with special azalea and camellia food, or use a balanced fertilizer like 8-8-8 or 10-10-10.

Among good mulches for plants: pine needles, oak leaves, old sawdust, cotton and peanut hulls, shredded bark and bark chips, and peat moss that has been soaked in water for several hours.

Indoors

Water-retaining polymers added to soil at planting time for potted plants will help hold moisture.

Spider plants are well adapted to hanging baskets in partial shade.

Roots trailing out of drainage holes or bulging through the top layer of soil indicate that potted plants need more room. But you may want to remove plant from container and examine root ball before deciding to replot.

Miscellaneous Tips

If you enjoy feeding birds in winter, then plant a row of sunflowers in the back or side of your garden. These tall-growing annuals produce enormous heads of rich, oily seeds. In late summer when flowers have matured, cut and dry them. Next winter, these seed-studded disks will be a true delicacy for birds.

Garden Vegetables and Fruits

Green beans are a good temporary groundcover, easy to eliminate when a permanent use of soil takes place. They also enrich the soil.

On cantaloupes, male flowers usually appear first and do not produce fruit. Some later blooms are female. Bees must transfer pollen from the male to the female flowers for normal development of fruit.

Eggplants need full sun all day.

Replant summer vegetables as they fade and become non-bearing.

Vegetables to plant during late July and August include pole beans, tomatoes, okra, peppers, eggplants, potatoes and squash.

If you preserve figs, gather them several days before they fully ripen to reduce damage from splitting and souring.

Trees and Shrubs

Butterfly shrub (buddleia) is difficult to successfully transplant. The best bet is to do root cuttings.

Apply heavy mulch to shrubs during the hot, dry days of summer.

Woody ornamentals such as azaleas, oleanders and hydrangeas now can be propagated from cuttings. Place cuttings in moist, well-drained medium. Most cuttings placed in semi-shaded locations should root within 10 to 12 weeks.

Remove suckers and water sprouts from fruit and nut trees so fertilizer and moisture will be channeled into development of next year's fruiting wood.

As blooms fade on vitex and crepe myrtle, remove faded blooms for another flowering period before cold weather.

Flowers

Sow seed of flowering annuals such as alyssum, nicotinia, zinnia, balsam, cosmos, annual phlox, marigold and tithonia for late summer and autumn bloom.

You can get color from annuals by sowing fast-maturing seeds. Choices include zinnia, cosmos, cleome and sunflower.

Prune hardy climbing roses when they have finished blooming.

Feed chrysanthemums every two weeks with a complete fertilizer until flower buds begin to show color.

Summer annuals need a monthly feeding of 5-10-5 fertilizer. Check regularly for pest problems. Keep dead blooms pinched from plants.

Caladiums do well in shaded areas and withstand sun if kept watered. Fertilize every two weeks. The better tubers are fed, the larger they will become before winter storage in a frost-free location.

Geraniums are sensitive to over-watering. Apply only after soil becomes almost completely dry.

Gather statice, strawflowers, cockscomb and other flowers to be dried for winter bouquets. Place in paper bags, stems tied into bundles. Hang in a dry place.

The Carolina Country GARDEN



continued from p. 13

Transplant daylilies and irises. New transplants will have time to become well established before cold weather.

Lawn

Heavily compacted soil is most easily aerated with the mechanical device that looks a bit like a lawn roller with hollow tubes attached.

In areas of established groundcovers, punch a series of holes over the beds to carry water down to the roots.

Close mowing of lawn grasses during hot, dry weather weakens grass, allowing crabgrass and other weeds to become established before the lawn can recover.

Encourage vining groundcover plants such as English ivy and Carolina jessamine (good evergreen vines) by training runners to cover bare spots. Anchor with hairpins made from four or five inch sections of heavy wire. Wire coat hangers are a good source.

Variegated liriopse, easily transplanted at any time of year, creates a good groundcover for narrow, confined areas. Secure container grown or separately existing with a sharp knife. An established clump usually gives four clumps.

Treatments

Newspapers, 8 or 10 sheets in thickness, make good mulch for the vegetable garden. Moisten soil well before placing papers. Sprinkle papers often to preserve moisture. This also aids in preventing germination of weed seeds.

Discourage red spiders on azaleas by spraying a fine mist of water on upper and lower sides of leaves.

Indoors

Houseplants tend to revitalize if moved outdoors in the summer. Move them to dappled shade for a few days, then to a spot shaded from noonday sun.

Geraniums can be rooted for winter houseplants in pots of mellow, loamy soil. Place in well-drained pots. Do not over water. Give broken sunlight. In early October, place indoors in a sunny window.

Miscellaneous Tips

Fire ants are a problem in mid-to-late summer. Check with your local county extension office for best controls in your community.

Squirrels sometimes uproot bedding plants but do not eat the roots or leafy growth. Success has been found in scaring squirrels from plant beds by placing small artificial rubber snakes among the plants.

Visit arboretums and show gardens to gather ideas for your personal landscape project and to see and examine new plant materials.

Fall: September - October - November

Garden Vegetables and Fruits

When sowing fine seed such as lettuce, mix seed with dry white sand. This helps to ensure proper distribution.

Now is a good time to plant a strawberry patch. These ornamental plants with white blossoms and red fruit make attractive, low-edging plants for flowerbeds.

You can plant a fall garden and expect good results from lettuce, radishes, cabbage, spinach, onions, beets and mustard. Supply sufficient moisture.

In the fall you can sow seeds of cilantro (coriander) and dill herbs. Also, set out transplants or sow seeds of parsley.

Winter squash and pumpkins store better if you leave a few inches of stem attached when you harvest them.

Trees and Shrubs

Cut away panicles of blooms on crepe myrtles. Plants bloom on new wood, producing more flowers before frost. Allow plants to grow into trees, because much of the beauty lies in twisting trunks in winter when top growth is gone.

Continue deadheading (removing blooms) of flowering shrubs.

If leaves of shrubs are not diseased when they drop, leave them beneath plants to serve as over winter mulch. As they decay, they add nutrients to the soil.

Flowers

Cut faded blooms from roses to prevent plant from producing hips, the fruit that contains the seed. This diverts plant energy to producing flower buds instead of seeds.

Peonies usually respond best to late summer or fall planting. They are somewhat undemanding in soil requirement, often succeeding in heavy clay. Plants prefer full sun or light shade.

Order tulip bulbs for planting later in the year. Store bulbs under refrigeration at 35 to 40 degrees for 60 days immediately before planting.

Before planting bulbs in dry, hard soil, work in a 4-to-6-inch layer of compost or old sawdust and about two quarts of complete commercial fertilizer per 100 square feet.

Climbing roses need to be well anchored to supports. Winter winds can cause damage if they're allowed to sprawl on ground.

As chrysanthemum flowering ceases, cut back tops. Tender varieties winter best in a cold frame. If that's unavailable, give the roots heavy mulch.

If October and November are dry, give perennials a deep final soaking so they will go dormant in good condition. They'll be less subject to winterkill.

Lawn

Lawns need about an inch of water a week. When rainfall is scant, measure the



The Carolina Country GARDEN

Winter: December - January - February

amount applied by using coffee cans at equal distance within the sprinkler coverage. When cans have about an inch of water in them, the lawn will have enough water.

Fertilize tall fescue, fine fescue, and Kentucky bluegrass. Use a complete fertilizer with a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 analysis. If reseeding is needed, do so now. Reseeding can be done in the spring, but seeds take better in the cool days of autumn.

The key to successful grass seed germination is seed-to-soil contact and continual seed moisture. During warm temperatures, this could mean watering often. Sometimes lawn areas require aerating and dethatching to achieve good seed germination.

Treatments

As soon as the temperature drops below 85 degrees and is expected to remain so for at least two days, it is safe to spray broadleaf evergreens with oil emulsion to control scale. Applying oil sprays when the weather is too hot can be damaging to plants.

Hand pick slugs or set out pans of beer to trap these nighttime nibblers. If you spread poison bait, be careful to keep it away from children and pets.

When you collect leaves for mulch, select those that curl as they fall such as maple, oak and birch. Flat leaves can create soggy soil. Mix pine straw with broad leaves to help prevent packing.

A good way to eliminate many insects in the soil is to plow in the fall. Let soil lie fallow over winter. Don't smooth soil surface down into an even layer.

Indoors

For low-light spots in a room, plant pots of low-growing Fittonia. It grows slowly and requires constant moisture and a monthly feeding of liquid fertilizer. Fittonia does well in a dark corner.

Miscellaneous Tips

Keep on alert for sales on garden equipment such as tillers, mowers, hoses and weed-eaters. Garden centers want to sell these items to make room for holiday merchandise.

Landscape planning involves more than beauty. Consider these major factors: Is the plan functional and suitable? Is it economical? Does it require too much maintenance? Sometimes it pays to consult a landscape architect, landscape gardener, or a master gardener from your local cooperative extension service.

Garden Vegetables and Fruits

Remove grass and weeds from vegetable and flower gardens so they don't become a haven for insect eggs and diseases that can attack summer gardens.

Till garden soil to expose wintering insects and their eggs to killing temperatures. Continue to apply compost and other organic materials to vegetable and flower garden sites. Spade in 3 or 4 inches. This prepares the soil for spring plantings.

Sprinkle used coffee grounds on the garden. They're a mild organic fertilizer, and they repel many pests. Earthworms like them, too.

Trees and Shrubs

Trees and shrubs planted now usually have ample time to become established before spring's warm weather arrives.

Considerable root activity occurs during our average winters. In case of severe freezes, mulch heavily from the trunks to the area above the end tips of roots.

After selecting varieties of shade trees, it's important to place the tree with ample distance from the house, drive, patio or deck. Small trees can be planted at a distance of 15 feet; tall, spreading trees should be placed as much as 40 feet away.

When rainfall is scant, continue to water trees and shrubs. Plants need soil moisture even when temperatures are low.

More shrubs are killed in winter by lack of water than by low temperatures.

Take care in pruning pine trees. If a pine branch is shortened, there are no side branches left with dormant living buds to provide new growth.

If a plant needs cutting back, leave severe pruning until late winter or early spring, just before plants will be putting forth new growth.

Shrubs that bloom in mid-to-late summer such as vitex, Eleagnus, crepe myrtle and althea should have any necessary pruning before spring's warm weather arrives.

Flowers

Complete planting of spring-flowering bulbs. Caladiums and gladioli are outstanding plants in this group.

If you've been chilling tulip bulbs in the refrigerator, remove them and get them in the ground before Christmas.

Cut back chrysanthemums every month or six weeks to keep plants compact. They will spread and produce masses of flower-producing stems.

Increase stock of perennials by digging/dividing/resetting these: chrysanthemums, daylily, Shasta daisy, aster, coreopsis and gaillardia.

Lawn

While weather is still cool, plant shade-tolerant groundcover to carpet areas where growing grass is a problem, like underneath shade trees. Some suggestions for shade-tolerant groundcover are vincas, ajugas, liriopie, pachysandra or English ivy. Liriopie is useful for planting in narrow restricted spaces.

Treatments

Never place manure in the planting home. ■