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GARDEN DREAMS

Get ready — now — for summer's bounty and beauty

by MARTY JONES



WHILE THE OLD ADAGE “April showers bring May flowers” may hold true for some warmer climates, growing gardens in the Vail area definitely takes more work. Advance planning, patience and ongoing care go into cultivating successful vegetable gardens and perennial gardens, alike. But don’t despair: If you’d like to delight your home’s occupants with fresh produce

or inspire others to appreciate your perennial garden’s jaw-dropping beauty this summer, then here are a few things to consider in April to give your summer gardens a boost.

Vegetable Gardens: Preparing a Space and Planting Seeds

April is the time to plan out vegetable gardens and to prepare a planting space by clearing the area and doing early-season

weeding. Snow may already have melted away from the ground in the valley’s warmer locations, making it possible to begin working mulch or compost into the soil if the ground is not too wet. Consider building raised garden beds if you haven’t already, as this garden design can help keep soil warmer and make a garden more accessible. Also make plans to rotate crops so that your vegetables are not grown in

the same space year after year.

April is also the time to begin seeding warm season vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and squashes indoors. With such a short outdoor growing season in the Vail area, indoor seeding allows vegetable plants to germinate and begin growing leaves and roots that can support fruit production later. Plants seeded indoors in the spring can then be planted

in the ground at the beginning of the summer season when temperatures are likely to remain above freezing at night.

Gather indoor seeding supplies now, such as seeds, trays, soil, and an organic fertilizer, and sow the seeds of your choice according to package directions. Natural resources needed include water, warmth, and light. A heated mudroom or a heated, dedicated growing space where an artificial grow light can be hung above the trays full of planted seeds is ideal. Growing plants indoors doesn't perfectly simulate outdoor conditions such as fluctuating temperatures, varying light conditions, and wind. So make sure that you take a few days to expose plants seeded indoors to outdoor conditions before planting them in the ground when it's time, and have frost cloths ready to cover them on cold nights.

Vegetable crops that grow well in this area without being seeded indoors generally include greens and root crops. Arugula, chard, collard greens, and kale all mature quickly. Plus, spinach and many types of lettuces will also grow to maturity easily within a summer season. Root vegetables such as carrots, beets, onions, and potatoes can be planted and grown outdoors in early summer, as their production happens below ground, which can help insulate them from temperature fluctuations and weather changes characteristic of a high mountain summer. While you don't need to seed these crops indoors now, consider now where they'll fit into your garden area come summer.

Perennial Gardens: Planning for Perpetual Beauty

Perennials are most simply plants and flowers that live for more than a single growing



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season, so it's possible to thoughtfully integrate perennials into an enduring landscape that also includes hardy trees and shrubs for beauty that will last for years into the future. A successful perennial garden can add color, texture, and interest to a landscape while also expressing your unique design style.

In April, take stock of your current landscape, and consider goals for the upcoming season. If you're planning large-scale landscaping projects for the summer such as adding a rock garden, a fire pit, or a children's play area, then begin working out a budget, and contact landscape designers for estimates and site evaluation. However, if your goals include planting a first-ever perennial garden or adding interest to an existing one, then begin by assessing your current landscape's assets and liabilities and by doing some research to create lists of perennials that interest you and will also grow well in your planting area's aspect and location.

As with vegetable gardens, April is the time to work on amending soil so that your area is ready to plant come summer. If the ground is not too wet, work in compost to enhance live soil that will promote healthy plant growth, and freshen up mulch in beds before shrubs and plants are thick with foliage.

Survey an existing perennial garden's gaps, trying to determine which plants might

not have made it through the winter. List what plants need to be replanted in early summer, and in the meantime, clear out debris and weeds to encourage new growth of existing plants. April is also a good time to move plants to new locations since they are usually smaller and just beginning their seasonal growing cycle.

Finally, April is a great time to brush up on knowledge that can contribute to your ongoing gardening success. The



bookshelves at Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm are stocked with gardening and landscaping classics as well as books that address specific concerns or highlight design trends. With some extra know-how, you'll work confidently through the spring garden preparation phase and look forward to a bountiful summer season. www.thepaintbucket.com



Marty Jones is the owner and manager of Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm in Edwards. Marty has lived in the Vail area since 1973, and his work with Colorado Alpines & Wildflower Farm has inspired extraordinary landscapes and gardens in the Vail Valley and beyond. Marty can be reached at marty@thewildflowerfarm.com.

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