

# Wait & see: Great urge to get outdoors, dig as winter ends; experts say patience is key

Kevin C. Shelly, Courier-Post; 3:14 p.m. EDT April 1, 2014



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Even though it *feels* as if the winter of our discontent is still with us, the calendar says otherwise. As spring deepens, however timidly, and takes hold, the chore of cleaning up and preparing the garden clobbered by extended biting cold, heavy and persistent snow and damaging wind comes to the fore.

Soggy soil, desiccated shrubs, cracked bark, torn branches, plants and grass singed by abundant road salt applications: What's a gardener to do?

The inclination is to get out there *now* and start something: clean-up, tilling, trimming dead growth.

And while the impulse, given the harshness of the winter, is to start having at it immediately, master gardener Eileen Meaney has a word of counsel for you:

"Be patient."

"You don't want to panic for a couple of weeks. Don't start pruning because something looks dead. You shouldn't think everything is dead until they've had a chance to bud out," said Meaney, who works with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Burlington County.

"The damage will be to the newer growth," on plants, which tend to dry out at their tips when the ground freezes and the wind howls. "But most of the time, they'll be fine."

Meaney and other Rutgers' master gardeners went to the Rancocas Nature Center last week to start cleaning up for planting later.

At home, she's already identified a new camellia in her garden as a possible victim of the brutal winter, but she's giving it some time to come around. And if it doesn't, she plans to pull it out and try something else.

"Don't be scared by what the winter did. Look on it as an opportunity," said Meaney.

Laura Laudicina, another master gardener with Rutgers, said a good rule-of-thumb is to "let the plant declare itself," before writing it off as dead or severely damaged.

"You can start trimming a little bit, but give it time," she said.

Ironically, despite all the winter precipitation, much of the damage will be due to drying out because moisture stayed locked in frozen soil and never made it to tips of plants, Laudicina said.

That will lead to more cracked bark and broken branches than after a more typical winter, especially for fruit trees and woody plants such as azaleas and rhododendrons, she added.

But it isn't too soon to start some chores, such as checking for damaged fences, pulling early weeds before their seed heads emerge, and putting down fresh mulch to retain moisture and squeeze out weeds, said Laudicina.

She said another good chore now is to take a soil sample and have it analyzed now so there is time to add limestone to make the soil less acidic, or add sources of nitrogen to depleted soil.

Meanwhile, you can start seeds inside. But patiently wait to move them outside. "Mother's Day is a pretty foolproof date," for putting tender plants outside without fear of frost damage, said Laudicina.

Toni Price, who is a member of the Friends of Rancocas Nature Center, as well as a master gardener, said not only is it too soon to plant, but it also too wet and early to till the soil due to the heavy precipitation.

"Don't dig your beds yet. You'll just make big clumps of dirt that will dry out," said Price.

But now is a good time to make plans for what plant goes where after first surveying light and heat needs of what you intend to put in the ground, she added.

Brooke McMinn, who oversees the master gardeners program for Rutgers, said one area many gardeners overlook is the burn that comes with road salt. She said it spreads in unexpected ways.

Meaney has had a bench coated with brine, even though it is 60 feet from the nearest roadway.

The only real cure is to wash salt away from roots and off of branch tips.

McMinn said fungal diseases may be up this year due to moisture, especially in turf grasses.

Gray and pink mold are the most common grass fungal diseases and the best bet is to rake it out to prevent it from speeding, she said.

Compaction of lawns, especially where there was lots of foot traffic atop snow and ice, could have a negative affect on grass, too, but she advises a wait-and-see approach to see if it springs back.

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On the web

For information on soil testing, visit here: [njaes.rutgers.edu/soiltesting\\_lab/howto.asp](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/soiltesting_lab/howto.asp)

Spring Garden Preparation

Brooke McMinn, a Burlington County horticulturist with Rutgers Cooperative Extension, offers these tips to get your garden ready this spring.

Scout:

Take a walk through the lawn and garden checking for signs of growth as well as damage. Look for sprouting growth of spring bulbs, buds on trees and shrubs, greening of turf grasses, etc. Be sure to look for damage to trees and shrubs caused by heavy snow and ice, as well as damage to turf from salt, foot traffic and fungal diseases.

Look out for salt:

Plants subjected to excessive salt may get foliage scorch. Sometimes the entire plant may die. The damage can be reduced by leaching the salt with fresh water. Gypsum at the rate of 50 pounds per 1000 square feet into the top six inches of soil may also be helpful.

Basic maintenance:

Soil should be tested prior to any lime, fertilizer or manure applications for the season. A test will give you your current pH level and your macro (Ph, K, Mg, Ca) and major micro nutrients (Zn, Cu, Mn, B, Fe) as well as lime and fertilizer recommendations to make any necessary adjustments. Kits that test for all of these things are available for \$20 from your local Rutgers Cooperative Extension office.

Damage inspection:

Check stone/brick work for frost heaves and cracks. Inspect raised beds, containers or pots for damage.

Prepare planting beds:

Remove winter mulch or, if composted, work it into the soil. If not composted, work in some compost or well-rotted manure. Apply new mulch to a depth of about 3 inches — 2 inches for poorly drained soils — for weed prevention and moisture maintenance. Leave a donut of unmulched ground — 3 to 5 inches around the stems of young plants and 8-12 inches from the trunks of mature trees.

Prune:

Remove suckers at the base of the plant and water sprouts, growing thick and straight up through the plant, from shrubs and trees. Also, remove older wood that ceased to flower from shrubs. Pruning should open up the top of the plant and allow air and light to reach the interior. Do not prune newly planted shrubs unless limbs are damaged.

Divide perennials:

Best done in the early spring. Overcrowded ground-cover plants also should be divided.

Start seeds indoors:

Start seeds for tender flowers and summer vegetables such as tomatoes, melons, cucumbers, kitchen herbs, and summer squash, as well as fall vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, cabbages, kales and winter squash for transplant.

Plant cold-hardy vegetables:

Direct seed hardy vegetables such as onions, potatoes, peas, beets, shallots, bush/pole beans, corn, carrots, parsley and greens (such as spinach, chard, endive, and escarole). Direct seed hardy annuals and perennials as well.