



# Spring Home *Improvement*

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*Local news matters*

March 2020

# Mason County gardeners share tips on how to start a spring garden

Celebrate spring with a garden Home improvement—one plant at a time

BY HANNAH HUBBARD  
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Spring is almost here and with it will come the urge to make home improvements. Perhaps this year a garden — flower, vegetable or both — will make its way onto the list of ideas to add atmosphere and curb appeal to the home.

Garden preparation begins long before the last snow pile disappears from the lawn, according to local gardeners and greenhouse owners.

The plant experts of Mason County offer their expert advice to fellow residents for when the weather breaks and it's time to work the ground.

## EMBRACE THE SNOW

Gig Rose said her advice came from another gardener a long time ago.



"In March, while there is still snow on the ground, spread fertilizer — an all-purpose fertilizer that covers everything. When the snow melts, the good nutrients will be there," she advised.

Rose is a long-time member of the Mason County Garden Club.

## SOIL AND SCAPE

Don't plant too early, cautioned Sue Hanson, the Mason County

Garden Club president.

"Stay away from working soil when it's too wet," Hanson said. "You have to let it dry out before you do anything. If you work it when it's too wet, you will damage soil structure. Don't jump the gun. Wait until the soil gets warm."

Gardeners should not add summer plants during May, she said.

Hanson recommended planting cold-weather plants — forget-me-nots, pansies, sweet peas, snap dragon, ornamental cabbage and kale, calendula and primrose — in the spring.

"If you purchase these already in bloom from a green house, they have been pampered and will need to be hardened off before planting directly into the soil," she said. "This entails putting the plant outside during the day and in protected area like a garage at night. A wagon can be a good means to

accomplish this task."

She also said to establish the "hardscape" first. Hardscapes are the non-living elements of a landscaping.

"When starting out, think about retaining walls and fencing. Have that done first and don't plant until the hardscape is in place," she said.

## MAKE PREPARATIONS

Consider looking over the garden tools while waiting for the correct conditions, Gwen Jackson suggested. Jackson is a member of the garden club.

"Be sure your tools are in good shape when it's time to work," Jackson said. "Pruners need sharpening. Wooden handles need to be cleaned, sanded and a coat of linseed oil applied."

SEE GARDENERS, PAGE 3

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# GARDENERS

FROM PAGE 2

Once spring sets in, there are a few tips she said will help plant life.

"Add crushed eggshells to your soil. The eggshells add calcium to the soil and keep unwanted critters away," Jackson explained.

People can separate perennials from the year before to expand a garden.

"Once new growth appears, it's a good time to divide perennials," she said.

She recommended adding the extra perennial clumps to bare spots or giving them away to friends.

Jackson also said to beware of the spring frosts.

"If your garden is in an area where late spring frosts happen, be prepared to cover up plants that have tender emerging buds or foliage if frost is predicted," she said. "Old sheets and towels that are in the rag pile are a good option and professional row covers are available to purchase. Do not cover them with plastic sheeting



or tarps. The plastic touching the plants will magnify the cold's effect."

## ONE STEP AT A TIME

Violet Buss, a garden club member, shared her step-by-step plan for establishing a new garden.

"First, walk the area you want to make into a garden," she said. "Then take a garden hose, a piece

of rope, or ground paint and make your perimeter — the more flexible the better.

"Once you have your edges marked, then sit down with a notebook and write down what plants you would like to put in. Are they sunny, shady or both?"

"Then, it's time to clear out sod, either by hand or with a sod remover. Add a good compost or

manure to the soil and work it in. Work up the soil with a pitchfork or machine and set out your plants where you think you want them — then start your planting.

"When all the plants are planted to your satisfaction then it's time to mulch. Use three to four inches of any type of mulch that you would like. Be sure to leave a few inches around each plant for water

to get into the plant. This is particularly important when planting a tree or shrub.

"Water well and enjoy your garden."

## TASTE FIRST

The first step is to evaluate the soil, according to Robert Byler, owner of Green Meadow Produce and Greenhouse located in Custer.

"A lot of our Michigan soils are very sandy," he said. "There are certain nutrients that leech away."

The two actions that a gardener needs to take are applying compost and calcium, Byler said.

"You can get a quick-release calcium to get started. Calcium carries all of the other nutrients," he explained.

"When it's low, the minerals will not be taken up into the food so it won't taste good. It will have a shorter self life, it rots and gets diseases easier. Adding calcium to your soil will solve a lot of your problems."

Vegetable taste comes from minerals.

"Picture a semi-truck hauling your goods to the store. Calcium is the box of that semi-truck. You need the box to put the nutrients in," he said.

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# Native landscaping benefits environment

Native plants require less maintenance



WHITE LAKE BEACON FILE PHOTO

These native plants were planted at Shoreline Elementary School in Whitehall in 2013 to reduce the maintenance costs and to improve water quality by eliminating the use of fertilizers on the previous lawn areas. Native landscapes provide the same benefits to homeowners.

BY JARED LEATZOW  
WHITE LAKE BEACON

Native landscapes are a great way for people to take their lawn and garden to the next level.

In addition to improving the look of your property, a native landscape is also great for the environment. By using native plants, homeowners are helping to support local wildlife.

People looking to get a hold of native plants can do so through the Muskegon Conservation District. Each year the organization holds two sales that sell native plants.

The Muskegon Conservation District has begun to take orders for their seedling sale. Orders are due March 20, the pick up date is April 18.

They will hold a perennial sale sometime in May.

'Native plants have a root structure, the roots reach deeper and the plants are more specifically adapted to the landscapes in Muskegon County. That translates to additional benefits for native pollinators, pollination; so **it is definitely a holistic approach.**'

Dallas Goldberg

Executive director of

Muskegon County Conservation District

SEE NATIVE, PAGE 5

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## NATIVE

FROM PAGE 4

"Native plants have a root structure, the roots reach deeper and the plants are more specifically adapted to the landscapes in Muskegon County. That translates to additional benefits for native pollinators, pollination; so it is definitely a holistic approach," said Executive Director Dallas Goldberg, Muskegon County Conservation District.

"So what we provide the consumer, or the residents of Muskegon County, is the option to purchase native plants as opposed to an annual plant that would be less beneficial for the ecosystem."

In addition to supporting local wildlife, native plants have other benefits as well. These benefits include: the

retaining of rain water, better pollution filtering, holding soil in place more effectively than turf grass.

"A lot of ornamentals are cultivated overseas; South America, Asia, a lot of species like that. So they didn't evolve with the wildlife and conditions here. So they might be ornamental and bred to look a certain way, they aren't adapted to the environment here," said Project Manager Kathryn Pfister.

Pfister said ornamentals plants are at risk of becoming invasive due to a lack of predators. Japanese knotweed is just one example, it has the ability to destroy the foundation of homes.

Goldberg and Pfister said some people like to plant native plants in their yards to attract certain types of wildlife. An example would be a hunter seeking to attract

deer.

Once native plants are established in your garden they typically do not require watering. They also do not require fertilizer.

"I think there is a misconception that a native landscape require zero maintenance, they require lower maintenance. They will require some watering during course of establishment," said Goldberg.

Pfister said fertilizer either kills, or makes native plants grow uncontrollably.

Converting a garden into a native landscape does not need to happen all at once. Pfister and Goldberg said people can derive many of the benefits by mixing native species with ornamental plants.

For more information visit: <https://muskegoncd.org/>.

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# Prepare soil for a spring garden

If you're unsure about which bulbs or seeds will thrive in your area, refer to the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map to discover new and exciting options. You can also learn lessons by visiting your local nursery and speaking with their experts. It's likely their flowers and plants are region-specific to your area but check with them about special orders if you have another plant in mind.

## PREPARE SOIL FOR A NEW GARDEN

Once you have chosen the size and location of your ornamental garden, you should prepare the soil to promote your plants with nutritious benefits. Here are some tips from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to get you started.

- Conduct a soil test to determine existing texture, nutrients and pH levels. Check your local area for an expert who can decipher the results and create a solution to the problem.

- If you're tilling a new area of land, ensure the soil is dry as disrupting wet soil can destroy its structure.

- Include organic matter to improve soil drainage and texture.

- For best results, ensure the soil is rich before introducing plants or bulbs.

## WAKE UP AN EXISTING GARDEN

Early spring planning will provide your gardens with bountiful blossoms and a stunning display of color. Start by spring cleaning the entire area of dead leaves and other debris left behind by fall and winter. If you pick up

clumps of soil and it easily crumbles, it's a good sign that freezing and ice threats are gone, and you are safe to add compost to your dirt without affecting dormant bulbs.

Gently loosen the top layer of soil to remove rocks and inspect for intrusions from things like roots or pests. During this stage, you should consider working in nutrient-dense materials like manure, or pre-mixed options from your local nursery to the existing dirt.

You will also need to eradicate weeds as they will commonly become a nuisance once the weather warms. It's good practice to make sure your garden's edges are in good condition and effective at keeping grass from emerging into the your ornamental bed.



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# Allergy-proof your home

As spring brings warmer weather, many Americans prepare for the uncomfortable and life-limiting months associated with seasonal allergies. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, more than 50 million citizens suffer each year.



Spring is often to blame as pollen is released by trees in its early stages, then grass as the season advances. While there is no straightforward cure for seasonal aller-

gies, there are many ways you can prepare your home to limit its effect. Here are some ways to spring clean your living space and enjoy the comfortable temperatures

without irritation.

## CLEAN UP THE CLUTTER

When you begin your spring-cleaning chores, you can lessen the

dust intrusion by eliminating clutter around the home. Make sure to eradicate areas with things like old rags, stacks of magazines and clothes you don't wear.

Once your home is free and clear, give your carpet a quality cleaning. You can usually rent a commercial shampooer from a local hardware store or hire a professional cleaning service to make your floor covering pristine. Many types of carpet can hold allergens and distribute them into the air once they're disrupted. After a deep cleaning, commit to vacuuming at least once a week to maintain its clean qualities.

## BEDROOM CLEANING

Since we spend so much time in our bedrooms, it's important to ensure the area is clean and free of allergens. In addition to regular dusting, keep a few extra sets of bed sheets and pillowcases on hand.

They are notorious for holding

dust mites or pollen that we bring home on our clothes or hair.

Try to wash them in hot water at least once a week and rotate different coverings so you're not left without when life gets in the way of laundry.

## CLEAN THE AIR

Spring invites pollen and other allergens into the air and your home. However, there are measures you can take to keep your living space clean and fresh. Check with an expert to inspect your house's ventilation system and ductwork. If there are compromised components, intrusion like moisture and dust are commonly introduced.

You should also invest in high-quality air filters in your heating and cooling appliances. When your HVAC expert arrives for their regular maintenance, ask them about more high-efficiency options to increase your home's defense.

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# Spring into safety

It can be easy to overlook household items that aren't always used, so be sure to analyze this sometimes-lifesaving equipment.

## SMOKE DETECTORS

According to the United States Fire Administration, you should replace your smoke alarms every ten years. It's easy to find the date it was manufactured by looking on the back of the detector. Ensure they are installed in every bedroom, outside each sleeping area and on every level of the home. You should also test the alarms at least once a month by engaging an easily identifiable button and change the batteries at least annually. If you are due for an upgrade, consider investing in smart detectors that alert synced alarms throughout the home at the first sign of smoke.

## FIRE EXTINGUISHER

Another important safety device to keep in optimal condition is a fire extinguisher. The National Fire Protection Association suggests making them clearly visible and easily accessible in the home. You should also periodically investigate the pressure gauge near its lever. Upon further inspection, analyze it for obvious signs of damage or wear. Most quality ex-

tinguishers are rated for five to 15 years of use but can vary by manufacturer, so regular inspections are important.

## LOCKS

If the locks on your doors are degrading in integrity, you may be at risk of losing your valuables and risking the safety of your family. Go throughout your home and test each lock on every exterior door. If they are difficult to operate or the door can be budged open while they are engaged, a replacement is necessary.

Hire the help of a local locksmith to rekey your home with high-quality locks and deadbolts. To add a modern touch of innovation to the simple lock, ask about options that are operated by key fob or smartphone applications.

## HOME SECURITY SYSTEM

One of the most effective measures you can take toward your property's defense is investing in a home security system. Many companies offer 24/7 emergency contact and will alert you and the authorities when their alarms deem a threat is imminent. It offers great peace of mind whether you're home or away.



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# Sprinkler maintenance

Many Americans who appreciate a luscious, full lawn throughout the spring and summer turn to sprinkler or irrigation systems. To perform at peak performance, they will require attention before being open for the year.

If you don't have one but are considering adding it to your yard, professional installation is the most practical option. An expert will prepare trenches while ensuring utility lines aren't compromised and correctly install needed components like piping, controllers and valves.



When the ice and frost are gone, here are some ways to prepare your sprinkler or irrigation system for its busy season.

## WELCOME SPRING

Before you can begin using your sprinkler system this spring, it's important to ensure the winter weather is gone and temperatures

will remain steady. According to the group Direct Energy, attempting to allow water to run while the ground is still frozen could result in busted pipes during the startup process, or hours later. You can test the condition of the ground below by digging at least a foot into the soil in an area away from the underground tubing. If you strike frozen dirt, plan to delay the de-winterizing project.

## ANALYZE THE CONTROL PANEL

The brains behind your irrigation system are typically installed outdoors. Make sure you follow the directions explained by the installer and confirm settings are accurate for time, date and zones. You should also check the integrity of backup batteries if your sprinklers rely on them. If you are concerned about their performance or age, visit a battery specialist in your area and have them tested to determine how much life they have left.

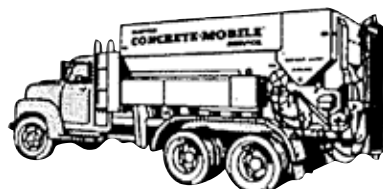
## CLEAN SPRINKLER HEADS

Depending on the number of sprinkler heads you have, this may prove to be the most time-consuming portion of the entire process. Analyze each component for signs of damage and replace the parts before attempting to engage the system. Use an old toothbrush to effectively clean each nozzle to ensure they distribute water evenly to their designated zones. Make sure valves are closed after cleaning, except the nozzle farthest from the main water source, it should remain open to allow air to escape during startup.

## OPENING THE MAIN VALVE

With the pre-maintenance performed, slowly open the main valve until you can hear water begin to flow. Allow this to steadily fill into the main line before slightly opening the valve every few minutes. Doing this too quickly can lead to expensive errors like busted pipes or valves.

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# Garage door maintenance

While general maintenance is straightforward, you can hire an expert overhead door technician if the job is too intimidating. During an inspection, they will highlight signs of deterioration and show you what to look for in the future. If you decide to tackle the chore on your own, consider these tips from the International Door Association.

## LUBRICATE

Overhead doors require many moving parts to perform smooth and efficiently. A way to maintain their integrity is by lubricating each component. This should include the rollers, hinges, bearings, springs and chains. The IDA suggests using a drop of engine oil on each roller, which will then distribute the lube to a door's bearings.



By lightly greasing the hinges and springs, you lessen the risks of the door becoming jammed and unusable. While engine oil is usually a suitable lubricant, check with the overhead unit's manufacturer to find

out if there is a different fluid they recommend. Some may insist on a silicone lubricant or one made specifically for garage door components.

SEE GARAGE, PAGE 11

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## GARAGE

FROM PAGE 10

### TEST FOR BALANCE

You will likely notice obvious signs when an overhead door is unbalanced. Problems, like jamming, strange noises and delayed or disrupted operation are common. Even if you don't notice any warning signs, use these easy steps to test for

balance as a part of regular maintenance.

- Close the garage door like normal.

- Find and engage the release handle to access manual operation.

- Lift the door three to four feet above the ground. If it doesn't remain open, there is an imbalance that must be addressed.

While testing can be completed by any homeowner, the process of rebalancing should

be handled by a professional. It requires adjusting and coordinating the system of springs and can be dangerous if done improperly.

### CLEAN THE TRACKS

Ensuring your overhead door has a clean track to roll on is imperative to its optimal performance. You can keep them in peak condition by wiping the system with a rag or vacuuming out loose debris.



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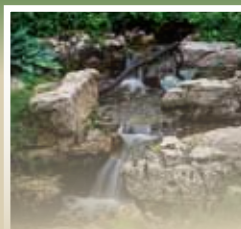
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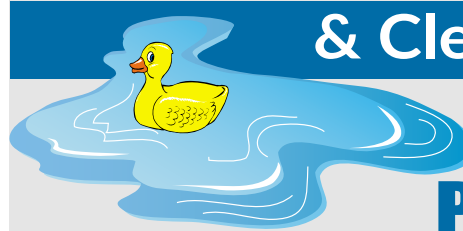
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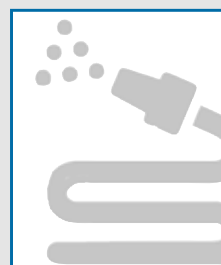
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# Prepare wildlife attractions

An exciting aspect of spring is the return of wildlife to your backyard. Flocks of birds and hungry squirrels will likely find a new place to call home throughout the neighborhood.

Welcome their friendly chatter by rewarding them with a favorite meal or birdbath to ensure they continue to make an appearance.

If your goal is to create a homestead that invites animals to feel safe and find a bite to eat, keep in mind that wildlife is to be respected. Make sure to remind children

that wild animals are not obedient like their favorite pets and may become dangerous if they feel threatened. Watching and learning about these animals from a distance is a wholesome way to spend spring with your family.

Building a safe and attractive haven for animals to flock may not happen overnight, but by following these tips, your backyard will become an entertaining place for beautiful wildlife.

## WATER SOURCES

One of the most popular water sources we can offer animals is an attractive birdbath. Follow these tips from Cornell University to discover how to place it for the most impact.

Birds prefer baths that are low to the ground and located near shady areas.

Use stones or branches to line edges of the water so birds have a



place to stand while drinking.

Water should be no deeper than one inch at the edges and two inches in the middle.

For a more enticing atmosphere, include dripping water to attract more wildlife.

Don't forget to regularly clean

the birdbath as its occupants will likely leave behind seeds, droppings and feathers.

## FEEDERS

When considering which types of feeders to install, think of the wildlife you are trying to attract. If a colorful variety of birds is your intention, try to use several boxes that offer them different ways to eat. Some animals prefer to dine while perching, so a hanging feeder with posts will be more attractive. Other less-picky eaters will be fine with eating from a platform or suet style option.

Try to incorporate different types of seeds throughout your yard to learn what your local species are most interested in. Don't be surprised to find animals like squirrels or deer visiting your yard to finish up the food that was knocked to the ground by hungry birds.

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