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Zone Report March 2016

Vegetables:

If you planted a winter garden, you should still be harvesting greens, kale and Swiss chard. As soon as your soil is workable, start planting more cool season veggies. Early, cool season gardens are the easiest to maintain, and require very little care after planting. From lettuce and radishes, with a quick return, you can also plant broccoli, cabbage, potatoes, onions, spinach, greens and more. Insects and diseases tend to be at lower populations in the spring, and the cooler weather and usually ample rainfall make for low maintenance. Asparagus season is not far away. If you do grow your own, harvest frequently. Remember you will not be in full production until the plants are four years old. For those who haven't planted any yet, now is a great time to do so. If you have a spot in your garden with at least six hours of sun, till up the garden, add organic matter and plant. One year old crowns should be available at all garden centers.

Consider planting herbs in your vegetable garden or even as ornamentals, interspersed with other flowers and shrubs. They can make nice additions and give you double duty. Be sure to avoid pesticides around any edibles, since there are different products for edibles and ornamentals.

Shrubs:

By now your plants should be beginning active growth, or at least showing signs of growing. Start to assess any damage you may have had from this past winter. Don't be too quick to prune, since some damage may be superficial, and flower buds may be intact. You still have time to prune summer bloomers such as roses, crape myrtles, althea and buddleia if they need it. Even if they have started growing, it is still early enough that you won't interfere with summer blooms. If you don't prune summer spirea, buddleia and roses every year, you won't have as many blooms. Do NOT prune any spring blooming plants now. They are either beginning to bloom or will be soon. Pruning now would definitely remove bloom potential. As with any pruning, have a reason to prune before pruning. Fertilize lightly as new growth begins on summer flowering shrubs, and after bloom for spring bloomers.

Perennials & Annuals:

Winter annuals bloom all winter unless we have devastating cold, but all that survive should be kicking into high gear now, and will bloom until hot weather arrives. Deadhead, fertilize and be patient. Pansies and violas will last for several more months. If your plants didn't perform as expected, there is always next year. It was an odd

winter season. Don't be too quick to plant heat lovers, even if we do have some mild days—wait until at least mid-April.

Many perennials are up and growing. If you need to divide any summer or fall blooming plants, now is a great time to do so. If your peonies typically lay on the ground after a rain, put perennial stakes around the plants now. This extra support should hold your plants upright during wind and rain.

Start visiting your local nursery or garden center. New plants are arriving weekly and can add some instant color to your yard. This is still the time period where a late cold snap can occur, so keep mulch handy to give them a little extra protection.

Lawns:

Lawns are loaded with winter weeds now which were already blooming in late November this year! Some find the early blooms on their weeds a bonus, while others get quite discouraged. Blooms mean that they are setting seeds to haunt you next year. Try to keep them mowed at a low level to prevent excess seed set. It is too late to spray winter weeds, but you can apply a pre-emergent to prevent summer weeds. Avoid the weed and feed products, since you will just be feeding the winter weeds. Hold off on fertilization until the grass has totally greened up—usually mid to late April or early May!

If you have an accumulation of thatch—that debris that you find at the soil surface, now is a fine time to de-thatch your lawn. If your soil is compacted, it is also a great time to aerate the soil. Machines can be rented to do this, but it can open the yard up to better absorption of water and nutrition.

Fruit

All fruit trees need annual pruning and if you didn't get it done in late February, do it now. If you grow peaches and plums, spray schedules are a must. Apples benefit from spraying, but are a bit more forgiving than peaches and plums. Check with your local county extension office for a spray schedule, but keep in mind, the first sprays normally start when two thirds of the flower petals drop, and should continue through harvest. Easier fruit trees to grow for home gardeners would include pears, figs and persimmons. They pretty much take care of themselves, except for watering. Small fruits are also wonderful additions to the home garden. Blackberries and blueberries require little spraying, and strawberries are small enough to fit in even small gardens. Variety availability at local nurseries is often best in the spring of the year. Remember—minimum of six to eight hours of sun and excellent soil drainage, plus a water source are needed for any fruit crop.

Houseplants and Tropicals:

Don't be too quick to move houseplants and tropical flowering plants outdoors. Avoid "sunning" plants on nice days—it can sunburn them. You can prune back the summer tropical flowering plants like hibiscus and mandevilla now, and start fertilizing. They should begin new growth now, and will be ready to think about blooming once outdoors in mid to late April.