

Winter is quickly ending and spring is officially nine days away. With the warm spring-like weather we have recently been experiencing, many of us are anxious to get outdoors and start scratching away at Mother Earth. After surviving another winter, our curiosity beckons us to inspect, poke and prod. We have the desire to pull away fallen leaves and plant debris hoping to see bright green, newly-emerging plants.

As eager as we are to begin working in the yard and garden, I say, "Exercise caution!"

Unpredictable is the single word that best describes the month of March. March is always windy. Freezing temperatures usually occupy the evening hours and daytime temperatures will frequently reach fifty to sixty degrees Fahrenheit. It is a month known to deliver many days of warm sunshine, yet surprise us with sudden and unexpected ice and snowstorms. For the next two weeks, I suggest that you wait to work in your garden. Right now, soggy earth and emerging tender shoots limit what we can do.

Control that overwhelming urge to dig, rake and cultivate.

Raking and removing old plant debris from flower borders exposes tender newcomers, many that could easily perish from exposure to the volatile, unpredictable weather, which the month of March can bring. Be patient.

Stay out of the garden. If you must be there, step lightly. Walking on wet garden soil compacts it and easily destroys its structure. A simple test to determine if your soil is workable is to grab a handful of soil and firmly squeeze it. If water runs out of the soil or if the soil stays compacted in one sticky lump, it is too wet and too early to be cultivated.

Even though I encourage restraint that does not mean gardeners must do nothing. A number of essential gardening tasks can be completed now in preparation for the new growing season.

Give ornamental grasses your attention. It is time to cut back last season's growth. These dry, brown-colored ornamental grasses that added beauty and contrast to last winter's landscape have served their purpose. Before the shoots of new grass appear, remove the dead grass close to the ground, usually a few inches above the soil line. Cut dry grasses scattered throughout the yard by March's wind can be very unsightly. Before cutting your dead grass, tie it into a bundle. This procedure allows for easy access to the base of the plant when cutting, and it makes for easier clean up.

Depending on the species of grass and the size of the bundle, a pruning shears, a pruning saw, a hedge clippers, and yes, even a chain saw might be needed to get the job done.

Burning the old grass is another effective way of removal; however, I do not encourage this method unless allowed by local ordinance and even then, only if there is nothing else that is combustible in the immediate area. Fire easily destroys the dead grass, but the quick and intense heat of the burning grasses can be extremely dangerous if not closely monitored.

A word of warning—some grasses have razor-sharp edges. Avoid cuts by wearing gloves and long-sleeved clothing.

Here are other tasks that eager gardeners can perform now.

Check trees and shrubs for damaged limbs. For most woody plants, late winter is the ideal time to prune. The plant is not under stress and insects and disease organisms are still dormant. Avoid pruning spring flowering shrubs—you will destroy this year's blossoms.

Repair or replace old plant tags that are broken or are illegible.

Now is the time to start indoors from seed many annuals and perennials. Plant begonias, calla lilies, elephant ears and cannas in pots, either for setting outdoors later or transplanting to the garden when conditions are suitable.

Although the temptation is to begin raking, digging, and cleaning in the yard and garden, exercise caution. Consider waiting at least two more weeks. I am confident it will be to your advantage and definitely to the advantage of the many newly emerging plants in your landscape.