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OBSERVER ORGANICALLOTMENT BLOG

Things to do in February

Caroline Foley's foolproof guide to gardening this month

The time for some seedlings has come

In February daylight lasts around ten hours, two hours more than in December. It may still feel like mid-winter to us, but trees seem to take a different view and it won't be long now until sap starts to rise.

If you have any bare rooted fruit trees waiting to be planted, or apples and pears that haven't been pruned yet, time is running out. Before planting bare-rooted trees soak them in a bucket of water overnight, or at least for a few hours. Make sure the hole you dig is large enough for the roots to spread out comfortably. Take care to plant them to exactly the same depth as before. Push in a stake before planting to avoid damage. Water well. It is important that young trees don't go short of water during the first year. After that they can usually fend for themselves. Mulch all fruit trees, old and new, after a good rain.

Need to get bare-rooted trees in now

Freestanding apples and pears – though not espaliers or cordons – should be pruned

by the end of the month. Cut out the 'three d's' – dead, diseased and damaged wood – along with crossing and rubbing branches and any mummified fruits. Aim to finish with a balanced, airy goblet shape. Use sharp tools that are up to the job as clean cuts heal quickly.

Prune autumn fruiting raspberries by cutting them right down to base.
Don't leave any stumps that could become diseased. Cut back about one third of the older blackcurrant stems right down to the ground. It is a slightly more complicated to prune gooseberries, red or white currants, as it involves some shortening (spur pruning) and some cutting out. Net the gooseberries before the bullfinches strip the bush of the incipient flower buds.

Starting tomato seeds off

Dig the beds in fair weather. This is the ideal time to add lime on vegetable beds if your soil is too acid. Should you be battling with sorrel, creeping buttercup, nettle, dock and mare's tail on your plot you will have a good indication that the soil is on the acid side. To be more scientific and to work out the quantities, give the soil a quick check on pH tester, or better and easier a soil tester. If the result is under seven, you may need to lime, depending on the particular crop. Lime should be added at least two months ahead ready for planting out in May. Choose a still day and wear goggles and a mask especially if you are using builder's (hydrated) lime. Don't apply fertilizer or manure at the same time as lime as they react against each other.

If you haven't already done so, make a bean trench. Dig out a trench about 45 cm (18 in) wide and the depth of a spade for runner beans. If you want to grow them up a wigwam, make it circular, and if you want a double row make it twice as wide. Pile in plenty of organic compost material and fork it in.

Prepare the seed bed. It will be in full use over the next few months. Rake to a fine tilth. Cover it with polythene to warm the soil. If you are planning to grow asparagus, this is a good time to make a special bed for it. As asparagus will last for twenty years don't rush it. The site needs to be in full sun and the soil free draining, completely weed free and well fed with compost or manure. If you have cold wet soil, it is best to raise the bed.

Sowing seeds for the cold greenhouse

Fertilize overwintering plants and the soil with organic fertilizers like blood, fish and bone or seaweed meal. These are slow release and so will benefit the plants when they begin to shoot in spring.

In milder areas in the cold greenhouse or warmed soil outside, you can sow under cloche cover early summer cabbage, spinach, early carrots (like 'Amsterdam Forcing'), the hardiest broad beans (Longpods), leaf beet (perpetual spinach), parsnips and swedes. Early peas, e.g. 'Kelvenden Wonder', 'Little Marvel' or 'Early Onward' can be started off sown in sections of guttering in the greenhouse or cold frame. Successional sowings of chicory seedling crop, spring onions, beetroot and salad rocket. Bulb onions and shallots can also be sown from seed at home in February 10°C (50°F) or grown from 'sets' later on. In cold areas, wait until the end of the month.

Sow tomato seed in a propagator in gentle heat of 18°C (64°F) and aubergine seed at 21°C (70°F).

When out on country walks, gather some pea sticks as you go. The new young growth is pliable and easy to work and can be turned to multiple uses quite apart from supporting your peas. Alternatively make a note to check out National Beanpole Week organized by the Small Woods Association in April.

Keep in mind though that by April there will be thirteen hours of daylight and everything will be growing apace, and you may not have a minute to spare.

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Victoriainthecountry
2 February 2010 12:05AM

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Readers might also consider the influence of the phases of the moon when planting. Those whose gardening/farming practices are guided by the moon's phases believe that just as the moon controls ocean tides, it also controls ground water and the moisture content in the soil. When the moon is waxing - growing from new to full - the moisture level in the soil is at its highest. And that's the time to plant.

Here's a rough guide:
From first quarter till the moon is full, plant fruiting plants.
Between full and last quarter, plant root crops. This is also the time to prune shrubs and trees.
Last quarter to new moon, weed and mulch.

I know of farmers here in Australia who've used this method with great success. We're about to experiment with it in our home garden and in our dry climate, we need all the help we can get.

allanjenkins
2 February 2010 11:50AM

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Victoria, on the allotment we always use a lunar planting calendar (Maria Thun's biodynamic calendar the one we prefer, widely available on Amazon among many others sites). There is a free site here but haven't checked it for accuracy. Have had much success so far with Maria Thun and would highly recommend her. Good luck with it

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