

# WHAT TO DO IN THE GARDEN THIS MONTH: **MAY**

*The garden is alive with growth and flowers now – shrubs such as lilacs, azaleas and rhododendrons are at their best. Summer seems just around the corner and lengthening evenings make working in the garden a pleasure. The first crops are almost ready for harvesting and the garden is bursting with life.*

## TASK LIST

- Finish sowing hardy annual flowers outside in May - later sowings will result in later blooms. Sprinkle general purpose fertiliser around clumps of spring-flowering bulbs and ensure permanent shrubs and hedging are given a generous feed using this or rose fertiliser. Hoe it into the soil's surface and water in before covering with a mulch of garden compost or bark. Hoe borders once a week to prevent weed seedlings becoming established.

- Lightly trim off dead flowers of alpine plants such as moss phlox, saxifrage and aubrieta once they have faded and trim excessive growth to keep plants tidy. Any rooted trimmings can be potted up to create new plants. Prune back the flowering stems of hellebores as soon as blooms are past their best, cutting back to their base to make room for new shoots. If seedlings are required, leave a stem to set seed, then collect it and sow when ripe and dried.

- Don't be lulled into a false sense of security by warmer days. While the weather continues to be unpredictable, it pays to take precautions. Night temperatures can still dip to freezing so be wary of planting out half-hardy bedding and vegetable plants. Keep a sheet of fleece handy, ready to throw over emerging potato foliage, or fruit trees and bushes in flower. Sacking or sheets of bubble polythene can be spread over cold frames and newspaper spread over young plants on greenhouse staging at night will add a little protection.

- In the greenhouse continue sowing seeds of summer bedding plants. Thin out those in trays, or prick them out individually into pots. Plant up your hanging baskets with fuchsias and basket plants and hang them in the greenhouse to give them a good start. Alternatively, buy young plants for pots, containers, and bedding - most need to be potted up into 7.5cm (3in) pots and grown on in warm, bright conditions ready for planting out at the end of May. Be sure to acclimatise plants to cooler outdoor conditions before planting out.

- In May bedding plants such as fuchsias and geraniums benefit from pinching out by removing the very tip of a shoot to encourage nice bushy plants. Check plants regularly as their demand for water increases and most will also benefit from weekly liquid feeds. If plants are becoming pot-bound, move into bigger containers.

- Keep a look out for pests and treat immediately with conventional pesticides for the control of greenfly, blackfly, whitefly, red spider mite and other pests. Control slugs and snails by trapping them under flat stones or grapefruit skins. Collect the slugs and dispose of them. Only use pellets sparingly.



- Crops to sow outside or under cloches during early May include dwarf French beans, beetroot, sprouting broccoli, Brussels sprouts, summer and savoy cabbage, cauliflower, ridge cucumbers, endive, kale, kohlrabi, lettuce, marrows, peas, radish, spinach, swede, sweetcorn and turnips. Delay sowings if soil conditions are cold and wet. For an early crop of beans, sow French and runner beans in pots in the greenhouse or on a windowsill. Choose deep pots, if possible, sowing two seeds per pot, and thinning to leave the strongest seedling which is then planted outside in late May or June. Alternatively, sow directly outside under cloches in May or June for a slightly later crop.

- Hoe the soil up around the base of the stems of growing broad beans for extra support. Push twiggy supports into the soil along rows of tall peas to provide support as they grow. Sow sweetcorn seed in pots in a warm greenhouse, growing plants to the largest size possible before planting outside in June

## OUR PLANTS OF THE MONTH

The rockery continues to provide swathes of colour with aubrieta, wallflowers (cheiranthus), gentians, fritillaria, lily-of-the valley (convallaria) and periwinkle (vinca) still looking good. Borders are now full of flowering cottage garden plants including aquilegia, campanula, gaillardia, dicentra, geum, gypsophila, nigella, tiarella, paeony and poppies. Many trees and shrubs are now in flower and looking at their best - they include choisya, lilacs, laburnum, azaleas, rhododendrons, wisteria, weigela, broom (genista), rock roses (cistus), crab apple (malus), deutzia and pieris.

## DIANA'S CHOICE

One of the earliest and most prolific climbers to flower in the year is the Clematis Montana; one of many of a large family of hardy plants. The spring-flowering Clematis Montana produces a mass of star shaped flowers on vigorous new growth which climbs easily against fences, walls, sheds, through trees and over hedges. The Montana group of clematis reach up to 20 feet and have a range of colours from white through to dark pink. Best of all, they can survive without annual pruning – just leave them to wander where they will and only trim back if necessary, after flowering. They prefer a limy soil, enriched with plenty of leaf mould to keep the roots moist, and in sun or partial shade.

