

Gardening Almanac for the Plateau

March

Weather Average Rainfall and Temperatures:

The average rainfall on the Cumberland Plateau for March is 6.04 inches. On average for the last twenty-five years, March has been the wettest month of the year. Average maximum temperature is 56 degrees F. and average minimum is 35 degrees F.

Activities Lawn - Cool season grasses predominate on the Plateau and this is the month for first fertilization of your established lawn. Use a quality fertilizer such as 16-4-8. Cool season lawns of the different fescues will begin to green up quickly. From mid-March through mid-April is the best time to put down a pre-emergent herbicide for any crabgrass that may have wandered in over the past year. Use "selective" weed control products on your lawn for unsightly broadleaf plants, putting on only when the temperature rises above 60 degrees. When mowing tall fescue, mower height should be set to 3 inches; for Bermuda and Zoysia, set the height at 1 ½ inches. Generally, no more than 1/3 of the grass height should be removed in a single mowing.

As the weather will have warmed up, it is a good time to cut trees that are diseased or shade areas you wish to be in the sun. Grinding the stumps out is necessary to inhibit persistent re-growth. Also time to begin the never-ending process of gathering fallen winter limbs and either burning them or breaking them into short pieces and adding them to your compost pile. If you want to burn them, be sure to call the Division of Forestry for a free burning permit if you live in Cumberland County. Permits are issued Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. The telephone numbers are 484-4548 or 788-5538.

Build compost bins if you have not already done this.

Till your vegetable gardens, if not already done. Also, till out any areas where you wish to expand your lawn. Till into these spaces any compost left from last fall. Some vegetables that are cold hardy can be planted: Cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower do well with a head start as do onions, collards, kale, English peas, potatoes, sugar snap peas, spinach, asparagus, rhubarb, leaf lettuce (can even be grown in a container), horseradish, artichokes and turnips. Be aware that frost can occur up to mid-May.

Monkey grass (liriope) needs to be cut back each year. Old growth is prone to anthracnose. Liriope can be cut back to 2 inches using scissors, hedge shears, string trimmers or even a lawn mower set on its highest height. (Cutting them to the ground will destroy the plants' growing point.) Ornamental grasses add a lot of winter interest if left uncut during the winter, but for best regrowth, you should cut these back in March. You can cut just above the crown of the plant, usually 4 inches from the ground. To make cleanup easier, use a string to tie the mass of stems into bundles before making your cuts. Then you'll have a nice sheath of grass to toss onto your compost pile. Fertilize established grasses as soon as new growth appears.

Get your lawnmower back into shape, and take the following steps to ensure it is in good working condition. First, remove the spark plug wire from the plug. Look beneath the mower housing and check the blade for nicks, dullness or debris that can accumulate and cause improper rotation. If the blade is dull, use a file to sharpen it. If the blade is nicked badly, either replace it or take it to your local garden equipment shop to be sharpened and balanced. Replace the blade and turn it manually to make sure it doesn't hit anything. Also, check the belt for looseness, wear and tear....replace if necessary. Check the tires for any deformities and make sure they're all set at the same height. Replace the spark plugs, connect the spark plug wire and you're ready for the mowing season.

This is a good month to start pulling any weeds that show up in the garden. Since the soil is damp and temperatures are cooler, the job goes a little easier.

Watch evergreens for spruce spider mite activity in March and April. This cool-season mite over winters on host plants and will begin hatching soon. Often the yellowing of needles is the first sign of a problem. To check for spruce spider mites, place a white sheet of paper under a branch and shake the branch over the paper. If mites are present, they will look like walking periods. If 10 or more are present per sample, treatment is recommended. Non-chemical treatments include a forceful jet of water from a hose, or even releasing lady beetles, lacewings or predatory mites to feed on the spruce spider mites. In heavy infestations, miticides may be needed but should not be used excessively. Heavy attacks that go unnoticed may result in branch dieback or death of the plant.

Summer flowering shrubs like crepe myrtle can be pruned after the last extremely cold weather, but before they leaf out significantly.

Early March is still a good time to transplant shrubs, trees and hardy vines. Fertilize shrubs and trees if this wasn't done earlier. Use an acid type fertilizer to feed evergreen, conifers, and broad leaf evergreens. Use an all-purpose fertilizer to feed roses and other deciduous trees and shrubs. If using granular type fertilizers, be sure to water thoroughly.

Roses can be pruned this month. Severe pruning results in long stemmed flowers and more compact bushes. Begin to spray roses for black spot.

Around the end of the month, prune your semi-woody perennials.

Summer blooming annuals can be started indoors early in March. Seeds that were started indoors last month will probably be ready to be transplanted into their finishing containers and given diluted fertilizer. If you have a greenhouse, it's time to take cuttings of "wintered over" plants such as coleus, chrysanthemums, geraniums and other perennials.

Divide and transplant clumping perennials such as daylily and hosta, and fertilize established ones as soon as new growth appears.

Plant tender bulbs and tubers (glads, lilies, dahlias, etc.). You may continue planting additional bulbs every two weeks until mid-June to ensure a continuous source of bloom.

Fertilize any pansies, violas and snapdragons which you planted last fall, using a liquid or water-soluble plant food. The three numbers on the front of the container should have the highest number in the middle, such as 10-30-20, to boost their spring blooming.

Finish pruning fruit trees – before the buds swell. You can still do dormant spraying now, too. Spraying should be done on a still day with the temperature above 40 degrees.

Remove straw mulch from strawberries at the first sign of growth. You can still plant strawberries, blueberries, currants, loganberries, boysenberries, grapes and fruit trees.

Fertilize rhubarb.

Aphids and caterpillars can be especially bad on early crops, so watch and treat as they appear.

Repair damaged areas of the lawn and overseed. Be sure to NOT apply any pre-emergent herbicides to newly seeded areas. Dethatch, rake or aerate your lawn. Apply dolomite lime if a soil test indicates it's needed.

Now through April is ideal for applying a combination of slow-release fertilizer and pre-emergent herbicide for crabgrass control to your established lawn before dandelions reach the puffball stage.

Houseplants will react to longer days and brighter light by putting out new growth. Now is the time to pinch them back to generate new growth and to thicken their growth. Begin fertilizing again with a dilute solution of soluble houseplant food.

After daffodils and other spring bulbs have finished blooming, do deadhead, but don't cut off dying foliage or tie it up with string or rubber bands to neaten flower beds. Bulb foliage must ripen naturally—turning yellow, then brown before dying—in order to soak up sunlight and turn into food for next spring's flowers.

Wildlife Birds you may see in March include:

Red-bellied woodpecker, Red-headed woodpecker, Hairy woodpecker, Downy woodpecker, Pileated woodpecker, Ruddy duck, Muscovy duck, Gadwall, Bufflehead, Canada goose, Red-winged black bird, Blue jay, White-throated sparrow, Brown thrasher, Pine siskin, Field sparrow, Fox sparrow, Crow, Rufus-sided towhee, Turkey vulture, Killdeer, Bluebird, Yellow-shafted flicker, Cowbird, American goldfinch, Song sparrow, Carolina wren, Tufted titmouse, Northern junco, White-breasted nuthatch, Mourning dove, House finch, Purple finch, Carolina chickadee, Wild turkey, Eastern bluebird, Red-tailed hawk, Sharp-shinned hawk, European starling, American crow, Northern mockingbird, Northern cardinal, American robin, Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) warbler, Yellow warbler, Great horned owl, Common grackle, Rufous-sided towhee, flicker, Great blue heron, and migrating Sandhill cranes flying overhead.

Plants In bloom this month will be Daffodils, Crocus, Grape Hyacinths, Forsythia, Primroses, Lenten Roses, Mahonia (Oregon grape holly), Andromeda and some Poppies. Violets and Bluets will also be in bloom.

This information has been created by the Cumberland County Master Gardeners Association, Crossville TN