March in the Tallahassee Garden

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: In late March start planting tropicals such as mandevilla for the hot summer and fall months that lie ahead.

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Spring officially starts in the northern hemisphere on March 21. But, if you’ve lived in Tallahassee long, you know that warm weather begins to tease us gardeners in late February. And by mid-March we’re not likely to have another killing freeze. The weather is glorious, and the landscape is coming alive.

Right Plant, Right Place

Most trees and shrubs can still be planted in March, but the sooner, the better. Your goal should be to have them somewhat established before the stress of summer heat sets in. Consider planting flowering dogwoods for year round color. They have white flowers in the spring, red foliage in the fall and red berries throughout the winter. Also, this is a good time to choose azaleas since they are blooming this month, so you can be sure to get the color you want. Other choices for spring color include native redbuds and magnolias.

Wait until late March or early April to plant warm weather annuals and colorful tropicals. Tropicals (like bush allamanda, mandevilla, and firebush) are fast growing, and many will bloom from late spring until the first frost in the fall, thriving in our hot summers. The roots of many of the tropicals will survive a mild winter here and resprout in spring. But even if the tropicals last only one season, they provide plenty of “bang for the buck.” St. Augustine grass plugs can be planted late in the month to cover any bare spots in your lawn.
Water

March is typically one of Tallahasseee’s drier months (although the weather has been anything but typical this year), so this is a good time to check and calibrate irrigation systems. Water new plants frequently until they are established, applying the water directly to the rootball, not to the surrounding soil. Consider installing rain barrels to catch some of the water from downspouts and prevent storm water runoff.

Fertilizer

Do not fertilize your lawn yet. Wait until two to three weeks after it greens up and all danger of frost is past, typically late March or early April. Unless you’ve had a soil test that shows you need phosphorus too, use a no-phosphorus fertilizer like 15-0-15. Ideally half of the nitrogen (7.5%) should be in a slow release form. Fertilize palms and citrus now with fertilizers formulated especially for them. Fertilize azaleas, camellias and other ornamental shrubs now if they are small and you wish to encourage more growth. Generally speaking, though, there’s no need to fertilize mature shrubs and trees unless they are showing signs of a deficiency.

Mulch

As always, maintain a three- to four-inch layer of mulch in beds to discourage weeds and retain moisture. There’s no need to remove the old mulch when adding new.

Maintenance

Prune camellias, azaleas and other spring blooming trees and shrubs after they bloom. Pruning later in the year can remove next year’s buds. Finish any heavy pruning of trees and shrubs this month. Be cautious when pruning crepe myrtles. Remove crossed and damaged branches but do not “top prune” them. Topping them stimulates excessive growth in a “witches broom” manner, all coming from the same point. This growth is usually weak and tends to bend or break under the weight of rains when the plant is blooming. Properly pruned crepe myrtles can be beautiful sculptural elements in the garden in the winter while those that are top-pruned look like odd posts in the landscape.

Wildlife

Spring is a great time to plan for wildlife, both wildlife you like and wildlife you’d rather not attract. Bird houses, feeders and baths are easy even for the beginner but also consider attracting, sheltering and feeding bees, bats, and hummingbirds. This is a great time of year for bird watching as many migrating species, such as goldfinches, will stop
at feeders here to refuel. Plant “deer resistant” plants like crepe myrtles, cabbage palms and yaupon holly in areas where deer are a problem. I’ve found that I need to confine hydrangeas, gerbera daisies, pansies and other tender plants to the fenced back yard that the deer avoid because of the dog.

As always, choose only those tasks that appeal to you. No garden is ever finished.

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