

## March in the Tallahassee Garden



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Plants such as this Japanese magnolia herald the beginning of spring in north Florida.

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Typically, the last frost in our area occurs in mid to late March. Summer annuals, vegetables, herbs and tropicals should be planted after that date to ensure that they don't succumb to a killing frost. Given the severe winter that we had earlier, you may want to err on the side of caution, and wait until April to plant tender plants.

Continue to plant cool-season annuals like petunias, snapdragons, geraniums, dianthus, nemesia, diascia, and nasturtium early in the month. Wait until April to plant summer annuals like impatiens and begonias.

Perennials to consider planting this month include: Brazilian sage (*Salvia guaranitica*), firebush (*Hamelia patens*), cigarette flower (*Cuphea ignea*), swamp hibiscus (*Hibiscus coccineus*), and thryallis (*Galphimia glauca*). All may be planted in a sunny or partly shaded spot. If you have a shady area, try variegated shell ginger (*Alpinia zerumbet* 'Variegata') for its striking lime green striped foliage. If you're looking for flowering vines, try crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*), confederate jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) or trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*). Azaleas should be purchased and planted while they are in bloom to ensure that you're getting the color and variety that you want.

Trees can still be planted this month but the sooner, the better. You'll need to be more vigilant about watering them as temperatures warm up. Consider planting a flowering tree for spring color. Dogwoods (*Cornus florida*), redbud and fringe tree are all good choices for the Tallahassee area.

Mid-March is the time to sow seeds of sweet corn, cucumber, squash, watermelon, cantaloupe, snap beans and pole beans. It's also time to set out tomato plants. Wait until late March or early

April to set out pepper plants. Herbs to plant this month are basil, rosemary, dill, fennel, thyme and oregano. For best results, plant vegetables and herbs in full sun.

Tropicals can be planted late in the month or early April for great color through late fall. They're mostly used as annuals here but are fast growing and thrive in our heat and humidity. Some good choices are yellow bells (*Tecoma stans*), bush allamanda, allamanda vine, mandevilla, and *Heliconia psittacorum* (the small-flowered heliconias). For optimal blooming, plant tropicals in a sunny spot.

If needed, prune spring-flowering shrubs like spirea, azaleas, and loropetalums once they have finished blooming. Early March still isn't too late to do other pruning that's needed on evergreens like boxwoods, hollies, and ligustrums.

Wait until two to three weeks after your lawn greens up before fertilizing it. Centipede grass is usually slower to green up than other grasses, so resist the urge to fertilize too soon. Use a 15-0-15 product with 7.5% slow-release nitrogen. Shrubs and trees may be fertilized this month or next using the same formula if needed. Older or mature trees in mulched beds probably don't need fertilizer. Also, fertilize annuals, vegetables and herbs monthly, but use a light hand.

If you haven't already done so, sharpen mower blades and adjust mowing height. Cutting grass too short results in a shallow root system and an unhealthy lawn. This is especially important where the grass is somewhat shaded by trees.

Remember, new plants only have a limited root system. Don't let their root balls dry out. This means that they will probably need to be watered two to three times per week until they are better established. If you have an irrigation system, this is a good time to calibrate it. Or, if you don't have an irrigation system, it's a good time to put in some flexible micro-irrigation to water new plants. A simple micro-irrigation hose can be hooked to any water spigot. Components are available at most garden centers. Micro-irrigation helps you put the water where it's needed without wasting water where it's not needed.

There's no shortage of tasks to choose from in the garden this month, but March and April bring some of our most glorious weather. And nurseries are bursting with beautiful plants, so get out there and enjoy yourself.

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