

## Gardening Tips for April

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Most crape myrtles are small trees, which grow to heights of 20 to 30 feet. At maturity, if pruned correctly, you can walk under their canopy and enjoy the lovely exfoliating bark on their trunks. Some people prefer to whack the tops off to get a rush of new growth and lots of blooms, which, according to horticulturalist Tony Avent and many other professionals, is crape murder, which leaves the trees looking awkward and unnatural. If you want a low-growing plant, buy a dwarf crape myrtle.

Spring-blooming plants, such as azaleas and flowering quince, should be left alone until after they have bloomed. They bloom on "old wood," and their buds have been developing all winter. Prune right after they have bloomed. Camellia Japonicas, which bloom on old wood, have just finished blooming. Prune them now, if you like. Rake up all flower debris under the plants and dispose of it. This debris can harbor diseases. Now is a good time to fertilize the plants and add a fresh layer of mulch to protect them over the summer. Most horticulturalists prefer a slow-release fertilizer, such as Osmocote.

Pruning may be done anytime to remove broken limbs and branches, and those that are rubbing against one another. In the case of rubbing branches, pick your preferred branch, or the one least damaged, and remove the other close to the trunk of the tree. Also remove branches growing toward the interior of the plant. This will let in light and promote air circulation, which will help prevent diseases and pest invasions.

It is a good time to fertilize all of your gardens now that trees and shrubs, flowering plants, and those growing from bulbs are actively growing. Consult gardening books and catalogs, the internet, or your local agricultural agent or master gardener to determine which fertilizers are best for each type of plant. For example, some plants, like azaleas and rhododendrons, prefer a more acidic fertilizer. If you are using an all-purpose fertilizer, like 10-10-10, be sure to water well after applying to avoid burning the plants.

If you have "finished" compost, your spring gardens will love it. Screen it through rough mesh and lightly till the rich, soft compost into the soil around your plants—or spade it into your vegetable garden as you turn over the soil before planting. Anything that doesn't sift through the mesh can be returned to the compost pile or bin. Continue adding vegetable scraps, coffee grounds, egg shells, etc. to the compost. Try to keep about a 50-50 ratio of green (such as weeds that haven't gone to seed) and brown (like dead leaves). Do not add any meat scraps or fats, and turn the pile or spin the bin often.

Flowers and vegetables that you started indoors from seed may be planted outside as soon as the soil warms up. Set the trays or pots of seedlings outdoors in the shade for a little while each day to "harden them off." Avoid full sun now; it can scorch tender new leaves.

If you planted cool season vegetables, like lettuces, spinach, and snow peas or sugar snaps, they should be well up and doing nicely. Thin the lettuces and spinach plants and use the "thinnings" in salads. Pick peas while the pods are young and tender.

Care for your garden tools and clean them after each use. Remove all rust, oil the moving parts and sharpen the blades. You can sterilize them with a mild solution of bleach and water to avoid spreading diseases as you move from one type of plant to the next, especially if you see problems.

If you can buy only one gardening book, buy *Landscape Plants of the Southeast* by R. Gordon Halfacre and Anne R. Shawcroft. Better Homes and Gardens has a great book on pruning as does Ortho.

Take time from your garden chores this spring to visit some display gardens, where you can see mature plants in the landscape. If you can get to the Raleigh area, visit the J.C. Raulston Arboretum: The Botanical Garden and the Coker Arboretum in Chapel Hill are beautiful places to visit as well. Closer by, there are wonderful gardens in the Wilmington area. Even some garden centers, like Carolina Home and Gardens, have display garden areas.

Look for spring home and garden tours. Every spring, Tryon Palace in New Bern offers garden tours around the whole town, and has plants for sale. Enjoy their gardens and come home to enjoy yours. Nothing beats taking a fresh cup of coffee or tea and walking around admiring your own garden first thing in the morning. Breathe deeply, relax and have a happy spring.

Hydrangeas (top) and roses, which were trimmed in February in preparation for "new wood" blooming.—Photos by Jan Corsello



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