

ON BULBS AND STRAWBERRIES

The first of the spring bulbs are starting to arrive in garden centres.

Each year there are a few new interesting specimens in many of the traditional spring bulb types, to wet your appetite. I personally enjoy planting a few types of spring bulbs such as daffodils, tulips and freesia so that in the spring the flowers will herald the beginning of a new season.

Back in days when I had a garden centre (over 20 years ago) it was a big event in February and March as stocks of the new seasons spring bulbs arrived.

Back then most of the bulbs were sold loose with hundreds of some types sitting in boxes with header cards for customers to help themselves to the types and colours they preferred. Some of the most popular were the anemones and ranunculus followed by freesia and daffodils.

Now days with bar coding and convenience for the stores the spring bulbs are prepacked with a header card and culture information.

This is likely one of the reasons why far less bulbs are sold these days as the packaging increases the price and one cant obtain just a few of several different types and colours of a variety.

Like a lolly shop its neat to get one of that, two of another and half a dozen of the frilly one etc.

Its not so much fun sorting through packets to see which one has the best bulbs in it compared to having a box full to hand pick your preferences. With some types big is not best where with others big is better and gardeners that like their spring flowers are very discerning about what they buy to plant.

A general rule of thumb is that you do not plant your spring bulbs until the soil temperature drops to about 10 degrees or lower and the autumn rains have started to moisten the soil.

March is the first month of autumn and I noticed the other day that dew is forming now in my part of the world so likely elsewhere also. That means two things, less watering is needed, so start to be careful on how much water you apply.

The other is leaf diseases such as powdery mildew which you can control with the simple use of baking soda. One level tablespoon of baking soda to a litre of water with one mil of Raingard added. If spraying for insects then Wallys Neem Tree Oil will also help arrest mildews.

If you are planting your spring bulbs into pots then use a good compost such as Daltons or Oderings place a little Blood & Bone and Rok Solid into the compost and plant the bulbs as to the instructions.

Place the containers in a shaded situation which gets only morning sun or late afternoon so the bulbs will not bake. This can be done now; just keep the mix a little moist and later on

when the weather cools the pots can be moved into full sun.

When you plant your bulbs in the garden I like to make a hole deeper than needed, sprinkle a little Blood & Bone and Rok Solid into base of the hole cover with a little soil and then your bulb.

Bulbs such as daffodils and freesia which can be left in the ground for a few seasons do need to be lifted and divided about every 3-4 years. Now is a good time to do so while they are dormant.

Be careful not to damage the bulbs and once lifted they can be separated and placed on a tray in an airy situation out of sunlight. Plant out the better sized bulbs and if you want some in the future place the small bulbs into a nursery tray with compost to grow on.

Seeds of all spring bulbs can also be planted in nursery trays for the future. The seeds will likely produce some different flowers dependent on parents.

Xmas lilies and other lilies will be in foliage at this time and it is important to leave them till the foliage dies down. If the clump has not been lifted for 3 or more years then they can be lifted while dormant, separated and planted back into gardens or containers.

Smaller bulbs treated as above. Lily bulbs must not be allowed to dry out so while out of the ground keep in moist sawdust, sphagnum moss or straw.

Dahlias are going to die back as winter creeps in and can be lifted (best) or left in the soil to take their chances in winter.

Allow to dry in a airy situation out of direct sunlight and store safely dry till the spring.

You can plant the whole tuber but it is better to layer them in a tray with compost and let them sprout by keeping moist. You do the same as you do with kumera, when you have sprouts that are about 8cm tall lift the tuber and you should find that at the base of the sprout some roots have formed.

With a sharp knife par the sprout away from the tuber without damaging the roots.

It is best to place these new plants into small pots with compost to grow on and develop more roots before planting out. Once you have all the plants you want you can throw the old tuber away.

Do this and you will have better dahlias each year.

Now to strawberries, some of you have had a great season but others like myself not so good.

The weather in spring through to summer was the problem I believe and the plants did not like the cold winds reducing the amount of berries and their size.

Once the weather settled they produced better but now the plants are generating lots of runners.

My strawberries are in troughs hanging off a fence and a raised walkway.

The amount of runners these plants are producing is far more than I have ever seen previously and if they all root in I would have enough plants to cover the needs of half the country. This is likely due to the spring conditions which put a damper on the plants.

So what to do with your runners? Simply ensure that they are running across soil so that they can take root. Spray them every couple of weeks with Mycorrhizal.

In May you can lift the runners and replant or give to friends. Older parent plants that are thick clumps will not do so well and can be discarded and replaced with your own free runner plants.

I was asked an interesting question this week which maybe of interest to those that have the problem of Sheep Sorrel. (Look it up on the net it has many health benefits as well as being a pest weed.)

Hello Wally

I am having a terrible experience with trying to eradicate sheep Sorrel from my flower garden. Please could you give me some suggestions.

I found an article on the internet about it and they said to deal with the soil by applying sulphate of ammonia which I applied two or three weeks ago.

This perhaps has helped a tiny bit but I need to know how often I can do this..

I have always used natural weed killers and hours and hours of hand weeding and I don't really want to use chemical systemic sprays but perhaps this might be the only way to go. Please can you help.

This problem has only arrived in my garden since we had a row of trees removed. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Any other suggestions to help would be most appreciated.

I look forward every week to your articles they are just so good and helpful. I live in New Plymouth. I would be grateful for your suggestions. Regards Robyn

Hi Robyn

Sheep Sorrel is not a very competitive weed but it will thrive in dry acidic soils.

The problem is its root system and any little bit left forms a new plant.

Your information on treating the soil with Sulphate of Ammonia is correct, the nitrogen onto the soil will only make it grow.

Sulphate of ammonia can be applied to the foliage dry and then a little moisture from dew will burn the foliage.

Give the area that it is living in a heavy dose of garden lime which will weaken the plant.

Rather than dig it out with hand weeding simply cut off foliage where ever it appears.

That with the lime should in time do the trick and not create more plants from damaged roots...