

What To Do in May

Plant vegetable seeds. Lima beans, snap beans, chard, black-eyed peas, New Zealand spinach, tomatillo EARLY MAY: Beets, okra, Malabar spinach

Plant vegetable plants. Cantaloupe, cucumber, New Zealand spinach, Malabar spinach, peppers, summer squash, tomatillo EARLY MAY: Chard, eggplant, okra, sweet potato slips LATE MAY: Watermelon
Plant herbs. Artemesias (mugwort, southernwood, wormwood), basil, bay, catnip, chives, comfrey, epazote, lamb's ear, lavender, lemon balm, lemon verbena, Mexican mint marigold, mints, oregano, pennyroyal, rosemary, sage, winter savory, tansy, thyme, yarrow

Plant annual flower/ornamental seeds. Balsam, candlestick tree, castor bean, celosia, cleome, coreopsis, cosmos, four o'clock, gomphrena (globe amaranth), gourd, marigold, moonflower, morning glory, scaevola (fan flower), sunflower, zinnia

Plant annual flower/ornamental plants. Ageratum, amaranthus (Joseph's coat), balsam, begonia, blue daze, celosias (including cockscomb), coleus, copper plant, dusty miller, gazania, geranium, gomphrena (globe amaranth), impatiens, marigold, Mexican heather, nierembergia, penta, periwinkle, portulaca, purslane, torenia (wishbone flower), zinnia

Plant perennial plants. Beebalm (Monarda didyma), butterfly weed (Asclepias tuberosa), copper canyon daisy, cupheas (including bat-faced and cigar plant), coreopsis, daisies (including ox-eye and shasta), daylily, echinacea (purple coneflower), eupatoriums (including Gregg's mistflower), gayfeather (liatris), goldenrod, ornamental grasses, lamb's ears, lantana, plumbago, red hot poker (kniphofia), ruellias, salvias, santolina, sedum, and many more

Plant groundcovers and borders. Frog fruit and horseherb are two native groundcovers that are good for the shade. The herb oregano is a beautiful border for full sun. Look for some alternatives to the usual Asian jasmine and liriope.

Plant cover crops on bare soil. Consider buckwheat or cowpeas (black-eyed peas) as a summer cover crop. Cover crops (a.k.a. "green manure" crops) act as an alternative to mulch, preventing weeds and erosion while they are growing. Once they are tilled in, they improve the tilth of the soil and add organic matter and nutrients.

Continue spraying entire landscape with seaweed solution, in the morning or evening. This is especially helpful in preparing plants for the heat of the summer, and in urging tomatoes, etc. to bloom and set fruit. Regularity is important; spray at least once a month, but no more than once a week.

Water sparingly. It is better to water established plants deeper and less often, rather than shallowly and frequently. The exception is newly seeded areas and seedlings, which may need daily watering. Water only as needed; turn off automatic sprinkler systems when we get good rainfall. A landscape's watering needs vary depending on weather: hot or windy conditions warrant more water. Your finger is your best moisture meter: feel the soil several inches down before watering, and gain an understanding of how quickly your soil dries out. Water lawn no more often than every five days. The best time to water is in the morning: daytime watering wastes too much precious water to evaporation, and wet leaves at night encourage fungal problems.

Topdress lawn and landscape with compost, if you haven't done so already. No more than a half-inch over the lawn, and a half-inch to two inches in flower beds and around shrubs and trees. This gives plants the nutrients, organic matter, and microorganisms they need, and helps soil to hold water this summer. Water afterwards to settle in the compost and prevent potential burning in the heat, especially on the lawn.

Mulch all bare soil areas. Use three inches wherever possible to get the benefits of weed suppression and moisture retention. In areas where there are stubborn weeds, get control first by pulling them or spraying horticultural vinegar (20% acidity) - sometimes repeatedly. Then layer at

least 10 sheets of newspaper on top of the soil, and wet them down. Be sure to overlap the edges by several inches to prevent those more sneaky weeds from creeping through. Use only black & white news. Colored inks can be toxic. Then cover with mulch. The newspaper stays just long enough to suppress weeds, but decomposes, too. Understand that the most invasive weeds -- Bermuda grass, Johnson grass, and nutgrass or nut sedge -- may still require even further pulling and spraying to maintain control. If your St. Augustine lawn was diagnosed correctly with chinch bugs last summer or it had developed mysterious brown, dead spots in full sun areas, check lawn for chinch bugs regularly. Water the area first. When looking for chinch bugs, concentrate on the green areas next to the damaged areas. (They've already finished feeding in those dead areas, and are moving on to greener pastures!) Chinch bugs are only about 1/6 to 1/5 long, mostly black (young ones can be tannish) with a white bar across their back. They are not the insects in the lawn which fly or jump up when you walk across. Some folks say they stink when they are smushed. Get an accurate identification if you suspect you have chinch bugs before you use insecticide. If you do have chinch bugs damaging your lawn, use 2 - 3 repeated applications of diatomaceous earth (d.e.) for small infestations, pyrethrin spray, or a pyrethrin/d.e. powder, for larger infestations. Treat all of the lawn in the vicinity of the yellowing or browning lawn that is in full sun.

Check all plants for signs of pest or disease problems. If a pest or disease is causing damage to your plant, follow the following three-point plan for action. Remove poorly adapted plants which have consistent disease and/or pest problems.

Identify the problem/pest correctly. Get an accurate diagnosis from a trusted book, nursery, or gardener, or all three. There seem to be more misdiagnoses out there than accurate diagnoses. You may think your plant has a disease or bug, when actually it is exhibiting stress from drought or other cultural conditions.

Choose the least toxic strategy for addressing the problem/pest. If you discover there IS a pest or disease problem affecting your plant, that is only the first step. Sometimes the best strategy is to do nothing except to nourish the plant. Then, if you feel you have to use an insecticide or a fungicide, choose the least toxic solution for that specific problem. For example, it would be overkill to use pyrethrin to kill aphids, even if it is organic. Pyrethrin is more toxic than you need for aphids. Even worse, it is literally sickening to see in print a recommendation of diazinon, malathion, orthene, (or) dursban to control aphids! The key to controlling aphids is spraying something every three to five days. A blast of water, fish emulsion solution, or insecticidal soap spray - choose just one or use them in rotation - for effective control. Another example of targeting the pest as specifically as possible is with caterpillars. Bacillus thuringensis or Thuricide is a perfect example of how to use the least toxic solution to the problem: it will control the caterpillar and harm nothing else.

Correct any cultural conditions contributing to the problem, and maintain plant health.

Why did the plant get the problem in the first place? If it is a native or well-adapted plant, planted correctly and in the right place, and maintained properly, it is unlikely to have many pest or disease problems, if any. For example, if a gardener asks me what is wrong with their Texas Sage (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) or Lantana, and if these natives have bugs or look puny, what we usually discover is that it was planted in too much shade and/or it is being overwatered. (Or else we are getting an unusual amount of rainfall.)

(Thanks to Howard Garrett's Texas Organic Gardening Book, the Travis County Master Gardener Association's Garden Guide for Austin and Vicinity, and the staff of The Natural Gardener for some of this month's tips.)