

# rites of spring

A gardener at Wave Hill shares his tactics for readying the garden for summer. John Emmanuel

AT WAVE HILL, IN THE BRONX, the rush hour is nearly upon us, horticulturally speaking. After the measured pace of winter work, the speed of spring preparations is picking up. We are always striving to perfect compositions, visual and textural, so they can have the greatest effect when their moment arrives. The *Crocus biflorus* spp. *weldenii* growing in a thick

mat of gold-edged thyme, for example, or the white scillas nodding beneath a cople of *Magnolia stellata*; even the distant vista of the Hudson River and the magnificent New Jersey Palisades seen through a frame of yews and junipers—each of these areas and many others must be cut back, raked out, or edged to highlight its beauty. Whatever work was left undone last fall and winter must now be done. This is our final chance for taking down unwanted trees, pruning big limbs, and cutting back and thinning out the ilex, junipers, chamaecyparis, and dwarf pines to control their size. Pro-



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portion is so important to us that scaffolding is set up every year to reach the highest limbs. With the first flush of growth, all signs of our work disappear. The *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* growing at the corner of the greenhouse has been the same size for 10 years.

At ground level, the liriop and epimediums need to be cut back before their flowers and new stems

appear. Small clumps are cut by hand, the epimediums falling nicely to the long hedge shears. For large stands we use a rotary mower set at medium height. With last year's growth removed, the crisp, fresh foliage can shine unobstructed. We also use the mower to trim the straggling *Vinca major* under a group of *Exochorda racemosa* before the daffodils underneath the vinca are tall enough to be damaged by the mower blades. With hand pruners we cut carex, ophiopogon, and fescue, as well, even though a carex in flower with a crew cut is a ridiculous sight. We trim the kniphofias to the ground, despite

**Benign Neglect** The only plants we leave alone in spring are new plants that might bloom on last year's stems. We wait to see what the flowers look like—if they come at all—enduring an ugly duckling plant in the meantime. Sometimes the fresh spring foliage is more important than the flowers, so the old stems and flowers are sacrificed the next season. Sometimes we

decide the flowers justify putting up with an ugly duckling, as with some of the hellebores, like *H. foetidus* and *H. lividus*, as well as some of the euphorbias, such as *E. amygdaloides* 'Rubra'.

We feed the lawns with a nitrogen-rich fertilizer. Acid-loving plants like rhododendrons, azaleas, and kalmias are fertilized with Hollytone or something similar. Even though

sulfur is an ingredient of Hollytone, we sometimes add extra granulated sulfur to troublesome kalmias to encourage ingestion of fertilizer. We also apply Osmacote or another time-release fertilizer, sprinkling a few of the beads around newly planted seedlings in the garden. Composts and manure are also used as top dressings around certain shrubs and perennials.

the fact that they are still green, and remove all the old foliage from the hellebores that will be blooming soon, such as *H. atrorubens* at the front gate of the Flower Garden, which, as they are first flowers arriving visitors see, are especially conspicuous.

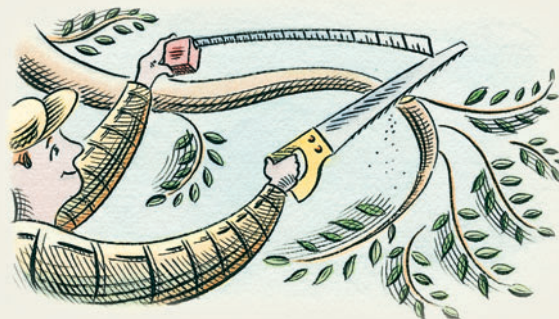
The tall grasses are cut down in December with the exceptions of *Miscanthus sinensis* var. *gracillimus* and *Miscanthus floridus*, both of which make handsome scenes through much of the winter. Now they are cut and shredded to form the foundation of a new compost pile—if they have not already been felled by heavy winds or snows. Similarly *Fallopia japonica* ‘Crimson Beauty’, which is left up through the winter to enhance the Wild Garden, is cut to make way for varieties of narcissi and *Mertensia virginica* that are starting to show at its feet. While we’re at it, we spade out runners of the fallopia, which is otherwise well

behaved. Across the path we dig up the stray clumps of *Arundo donax*, the giant reed grass, a much more aggressive spreader and not easily unearthed. The black-stemmed bamboo, *Phyllostachys niger*, growing nearby receives the same treatment. We must be ruthless because the spiky roots have run a long way off through stands of *Filipendula rubra* and *Silphium perfoliatum* and on into the roots of *Juniperus rigida*. One way or another we pay for our beauty.

Starting with the first snowdrop in late February and continuing until the last narcissus has been deadheaded, we appraise the state of our bulb plantings. Does *Crocus* ‘Zwanenburg’ need thinning out? Does *Crocus turkestanica* need consolidating? Should we add to the winter

aconite? We buy bulbs each fall based on notes taken the previous spring. New varieties as well as those supplementing existing stands are planted out in our Test Bed. Now that they are blooming, we move them into place. Where existing plantings are crowded, we lift the bulbs, knock off their soil, and spread them about. Transplanting them now helps us get the picture right and also prevents us from damaging already settled bulbs in the fall. As the spring progresses we will continue taking notes on each crop of flowers, looking ahead to filling out autumn’s bulb orders.

Although we could prune most vines in January or February, we often leave them because of their pleasing winter presence. The campsis on the pergola at the steps leading up to the Wild Garden is a wonderful, wild tangle that would shame Medusa. We cut each branch



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back to the point where a large terminal knob has formed from previous pruning. But the trumpet vines in the Aquatic Garden are relatively new, so we are allowing a few branches to continue on their way across the pergola, tying them in as they lengthen. While we are on the pergola, we check the *Fallopia baldschuanica* for breaking buds. We leave them snarled about the wooden supports until we see they are ready to burst with growth. Eliminating the old growth too early makes them vulnerable to winter wind storms that can rip them from the pergola. This is also the case with certain clematis, such as *C. brevicaudata* and *C. flammula*. Except for an occasional thinning out of stems, we let their new growth ride up the old, so that

## The Call of the Catkins

We grow numerous willows (*Salix* spp.) for the beauty of their bark during the dark winter months. With the coming of spring, the stems also begin bearing their floral buds, or catkins.

- *S. alba* subsp. *vitellina*, stems of bright egg yolk yellow.

- *S. alba* subsp. *vitellina* ‘Brezensis’, stems of gold-tinted red.

- *S. fargesii* suffers in our Zone 6b, but wow—such beautiful red pedicels on evergreen leaves and new shoots of lovely reddish brown.

- *S. gracilistyla*, hoary stems that show up well in sunlight.

- *S. gracilistyla* ‘Melanostachys’, very black catkins with red anthers glowing like embers.

- *S. irrorata*, shoots covered with white bloom, with brick-red anthers that turn yellow.

they can establish themselves without need for wire and stakes. Once the new year's growth is well developed, we cut away any dead stems that are showing. The *Aristolochia durior*, without its large leaves, presents a tangled confusion of green stems, which takes some time to decipher. Thankfully, it is a vigorous plant and highly forgiving. The wisterias throughout the garden, like the trumpet vines, can be attacked any time in winter, but are often left until now. The long strands are cut back to spurs of three buds. On the other hand, the climbing roses in the Flower Garden, which knit themselves together along the fence, must be carefully culled. Unwanted stems are removed piecemeal, hopefully before the buds swell enough to be damaged.

March is the last chance for a proper pruning of the various grapevines. Pruning them when the sap is already flowing causes unnecessary bleeding. However, if the season turns warm, which it is apt to do of recent years, then prune we must, whether the vines bleed or not. Gardening is not for the timid or the rule-bound.

Many shrubs need our attention now. We prune the old wood out of the shrub roses this month. At the same time in the Flame Garden the *Cotinus* 'Royal Purple', the *Gleditsia* 'Ruby Lace', and the golden catalpa are pollarded to encourage a flush of colorful new leafy growth at eye level. In the Gold Border, the red-leaved berberis and 'Goldmound' spirea are cut back hard to maintain the desired proportions. And behind them, *Sambucus nigra* 'Aurea', the golden privet, and *Physocarpus* 'Dart's Gold' are

cut back to a few feet from the ground for the same reason. The various golden and red salixes are also being taken back hard. The new stems they produce have the brightest color and will be a welcome addition come next winter. If the buds of the buddleias are strong and showing promise, they too are cut back to the desired size. On the Back Road Border *Buddleia alternifolia* and *Vitex agnus-castus*, which are espaliered on the wall, must be cut back hard to their essential woody frames.



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By now we have removed all of the Christmas tree boughs we collected last December from the local Christmas tree vendors to cover the boxwoods and other evergreen shrubs and groundcovers that suffer from winter burn in February. We have also applied dormant oil to the various genera that suffer from scale, either by spraying or painting them. We are racing from

vignette to vignette pulling out the ever-present onion grass. The bare earth growls at us. We haven't yet begun to mulch it. Thankfully, visitors see the daffodils and bluebells and disregard the ground percolating with chickweed. We have cut the *Alchemilla alpina* and *A. mollis* back to the ground. We are planting out the perennials we've been growing in the frames or bought from mail-order nurseries. We are calling upon the great shaman powers to slow down the increasing onslaught of spring. But there is nothing to do now but jump on or be left behind, for the wild ride of May has begun. ♡

**Favorite Tools** The choice of a favorite tool, like a favorite tie or scarf, is driven by habits and taste. At this time of year I rely primarily on three tools with a fourth as runner up. The first is a spade with heavy metal shank to protect the knees whenever you dig down into the soil and strike a rock. The spade

is perfect for both dividing and moving perennials, but also for digging out small weeds as well as saplings and onion grass clumps, and even weed-whacking small areas of meadow. A metal spring rake is essential during this time for cleaning out beds of old leaves and winter debris; also essential for raking

out gravel paths. Finally, felco pruning shears with a holster are a must since we are constantly pruning and dead-heading. The runner up is the asparagus knife, our lightweight weeder of choice. With it, we can work closely in among perennial clumps where small weeds must be controlled at the start.