

# Early Spring Sierra Gardens

Late winter is the season of melting snow, crocus in the lawn, rock garden narcissus, returning robins, and pussy willow in bloom, also of broken shrubs, straw-brown lawns, and mud. The deciduous trees and shrubs are naked and the snows are off-and-on receding, the sun is higher, the days are longer, and the ground is starting to see a lot of sun. Having some evergreen shrubs in your landscape to emerge from under the snow gives your garden life. Dwarf pine or spruce, groundcover Manzanita, *Cotoneaster dammeri*, Oregon grape, mountain mahogany, or hardy holly provide nice living greens to the garden. You can also plant evergreen perennials like *Bergenia*, *Iberis* and *Teucrium* that keep their foliage year-round.

*“Springtime demands freedom of expression... spring effects therefore, should be naturalistic – surprising as nature is surprising, startling with unexpectedness.”* - Wise Encyclopedia.

*“In the High Sierra, April is a winter month that happens to give us some incredibly nice spring days”* - a Truckee saying.

Little warm spots in the garden viewed from windows are ideal places to plant the “harbingers of spring” that cheer us as winter wanes (Crocus, dwarf iris, rock garden *Narcissus*, *Scilla* and *Chionodoxa*).

## PREPARING FOR PLANTING

**Soil Preparation** – If you were unable to prepare your soil in fall, do it as soon as possible in spring. When your native earth is free of snow, thawed and no longer muddy, spread a thick layer of mature compost (Gromulch) or well-aged farmyard-blend manure over your beds. Soil compacted by moisture and tons of heavy snow needs to be loosened and improved. Use a spading fork to pry up and aerate the soil without actually turning it. If the beds are new, go ahead and mix the compost deeply into the soil for the first 2-3 years, and improve only the top from then on.

**Indoor seeding** - Get some seeds started indoors. Early spring is a great time to get a head start on summer gardening, especially if you plan to grow vegetables. Cold-hardy plants that can go outdoors soon and long-season crops that need an extended head-start are the most common varieties to start indoors. See [our handouts on indoor seed starting](#) for more information on how to start seeds indoors.

**Wildflower Seed** – In our experience, early spring is the best time to spread wildflower seed in areas where care will be

minimal or non-existent. This early, the soil surface is usually moist and we nearly always get more snow and rain. We have several specially formulated (and constantly curated) Villager meadow, restoration and “Wildflower” mixes to provide reliable and lasting summer color. Follow [easy planting instructions](#) on the **Strictly Native, Mt. Native, Truckee Garden, or the Western Pollinator Wildflower Mix** packets.

## SPRING MAINTENANCE

**Lawns** – When snow has melted and the soil is no longer wet, lightly rake to remove sticks, pine needles, matted straw (last year's lawn blades), and to allow air, light, and warmth into the turf. Sunlight, warmth, air, and moisture, initiate growth. Top-dress lawns with a light layer (2cu.ft./200 sq.ft.) of **Kellogg's Topper**. Topper can also be used on top of snow to speed melting and improve soils anywhere in the garden. Mature compost reintroduces beneficial microbes into the lawn that decompose straw, fight pathogens, and improve soils. Low areas may be brought to grade over the season with several light top-dressings of sandy topsoil or play-sand. Aerating is important for alleviating our snow-compacted soils and is better before topdressing. A **spading fork** works well in small areas, to pry loose and “lift” compacted soils. A motorized “plugger” is a better option for larger areas. **Biosol with G&B organic lawn fertilizer** is very slow releasing spring fertilization that is often applied after aerating and just before topdressing. In the growing season, your mower should be set to at least 3 1/2” high. A healthy soil beneath your lawn will only need 1-2 feedings of organic fertilizer each year. Apply **castor oil** granules to repel moles ASAP. [More.](#)

*Note: regular use of chemical lawn fertilizers can diminish the populations of beneficial microbes, increase thatch build-up, diminish soil structure, inhibit water up-take, leach into our groundwater and reduce your lawn's resistance to insects and diseases. It's better to avoid most of them.*

**Lawns that have suffered winter damage** by meadow mice (voles), pocket gophers, or dog urine may be attended to early. Vigorously rake damaged areas. Fill in low or dug-out areas with sandy topsoil. Loosen compacted soils with a spading fork; work in a little G&B fertilizer with Topper, and seed with a matching seed blend. Lightly cover the seed with no more than 1/8th inch of Kellogg's Topper. Add 2-3 T of sugar or molasses to any urine damage spots. The sugar will boost bacterial populations to help tie-up the excess nitrogen

burning the grass' roots. Treat the repair areas as you would new lawn: do not let them dry out. (See: [Lawn Care handout](#)).

**Water** – If there hasn't been any substantial rain or snow for several weeks and if the soil is exposed, your plants may need water. **If you have bare soil, you need to mulch.** In very dry winters, we may need to water as early as February, depending on the microclimate. Lawns begin to use water soon after they are out from under the snow (although they do not need irrigation until the soil begins to dry). Moisture loss is minimal now but sunny lawns are often our first plants to need water. [More](#).

**Fertilizing** – Organic fertilizers feed the plants and the soil and a healthy soil feeds and protects the plants. With millions of tons of chemical fertilizers used each year in the U.S., crop yields per acre are near the lowest in the world. Old World countries that have relied on manures and composts for 50 centuries have extraordinary yields, many times those of the U.S. Generally the best early feedings are from composts and manures that do more to feed the soil biology rather than plants directly. Spring **Farmyard Blend** manures are especially recommended for asparagus, roses and rhubarb. *“Commercial fertilizers add no permanent value to the soils... It is exactly this thing that composts accomplish.”* Early applications of seaweed can help plants fight diseases while increasing new root production. [Biosol info](#).

**Compost**– Add materials to your compost during the winter. Plant tissues freeze and thaw repeatedly and mechanically break-down over winter and are more easily digested by composting microbes when things warm up.

**Pruning** – Late winter is, physiologically, THE best time for pruning deciduous woody plants. Pruning is best completed just before bud swelling as they absorb water and nutrients. The end of dormancy triggers cell division and prepares the tree for active growth when cuts will **seal** quickly. Later cuts waste resources in the material we remove. Potentilla needs periodic spring pruning; it blooms on new wood. *Amelanchier, Cornus, Ribes, and Prunus* will branch more densely if pruned early. Lilacs & Viburnum, two favorite spring flowering shrubs are best pruned after blooming but it is much easier now. Gooseberries and currants bear on old wood; so only careful thinning of old or damaged canes should be done. Raspberry canes should be thinned, tipped and the 2-yr old wood removed. [More Pruning](#).

**Raking** – Raking when the soil is frozen, and the needles are not, can make cleanup easy. Cleaning up dead foliage from around perennials will reduce insect problems this summer. Replace what you rake up with compost mulch.

**Mulching** – Mulch helps retain the limited moisture available, suppresses weeds, and may extend dormancy during the early season. Using newspaper or cardboard as “sheet mulch” over large areas is highly effective for both weed control and soil enhancement. [More](#).

**Tree Repair and Resurrection** - Wood screws, bolts, washers, and nuts can all be effectively used to repair trees and shrubs. Masking tape is also a valuable tool in tree training. The vascular tissues in trees and shrubs are composed of layers of tubes that form sheets, positioned between the dead wood and the dead bark or cork. If you roll a piece of paper into a tube, it serves as a good analogy for the vascular cambium, from which the xylem and phloem are produced. [More](#).

**Planting and Transplanting** may be done now. Trees, shrubs, vines, perennials, and unplanted fall bulbs will take advantage of spring root growth in their new locations. Roughly 20% expansive root growth occurs in spring, before foliage emerges (~80% in fall). Plants are ALWAYS much happier in the ground than they are in pots. [Instructions](#).

## HELPFUL NATURAL TREATMENTS

**Dormant Oil Spray** – Refined mineral / vegetable oils are excellent for tenacious pests like spider mites or recurrent aphids. Oil sprays are used outdoors while plant buds are still closed. Some are also labeled for use as a plant polish and for growing season at a lower rate. They can make your houseplants shine while smothering insects and their eggs.

**Neem Oil** - Neem has been used medicinally and agriculturally in India for thousands of years. It is antifungal, insecticidal, and it smothers insects and their eggs. Neem is possibly mildly systemic and it has insect repellent properties. Use it as aspen trees begin breaking dormancy to prevent sawflies (cause a leaf fold) from landing and laying eggs.

**Lime** – If not done in the fall, now is a good time to apply lime (calcium) over the soil of gardens. Lilac, peony, *Dianthus*, clover, and bluegrass are all especially appreciative of regular liming. Peas and beans benefit from lime as well.

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## OTHER EARLY SPRING CONSIDERATIONS

**More on Seeds** – Techniques vary with each type of seeding. **Lawn, clover and wildflower seed** can be mixed with compost and simply tossed where they're wanted though mulching and fertilizing, and irrigation improves odds greatly. **Vegetable seeds** need a clean, well-screened, and level surface. Seeds of hardy plants like beets, radish and poppy should be sown as soon as the soil is workable so they can benefit from the cool moist conditions. **Sweet Pea seeds** should be planted in a 2-3" trench, gradually filled as the seedlings grow. The soil, 10-12", below sweet peas should be amended with compost and have organic **fertilizer** and **lime** added. April 1 is the traditional day here.

Seeds of plants not hardy enough to stand cold outdoor temperatures should be started indoors, in hot beds or in greenhouses. Even cold-hardy seedlings need to be "hardened-off" in a cold frame, or with layers of row-cover, or on a porch before being planted out later on. (*see the indoor seed-starting hand-out*).

**Propagation** – Some shrubs are easily propagated from hard-wood cuttings: old or end-of-growing season cuttings (spiraea, willow, current, etc..). Willow stakes can be harvested and driven into the ground now.

**Forcing** branches of flowering shrubs and trees like apple, cherry, dogwood, forsythia, hawthorn, plum, and willow to bloom indoors is fun. Many of these shrubs can be coppiced: severely cut back in spring, year after year. The new growth is straight and tall and excellent for forcing NEXT spring.

**Villager**  
California Native  
Lupine Seed Mix

\$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Net wt: \_\_\_\_\_



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