February Gardening To-Do

- Pore through catalogs, garden books, web sites, and magazines to plan for spring. Put your ideas into a garden notebook, make from a three-ring notebook, with pages for notes and photos, pocket folders for articles and notes and a zip pocket to hold spring receipts and plant labels.
- Make on-line and mail-order purchases early. Supplies of the most popular items tend to start running out in March or so, especially this year when vegetable gardening promises to be popular once again.
- Take inventory. Look over your supplies fertilizers, potting soil, soil amendments, and other garden materials and stockpile now. You'll be ready to go once the spring rush hits.
- Sharpen and repair hand tools as needed.
- Wash up pots. Use hot soapy water and rinse so the pots are set for spring planting.
- Tidy your tool area. Now is a good time to clean up and organize your garden tools and any tool shed or potting area you have.
- Start seeds of parsley, onions, perennials, and other slow-growing plants. Don't start other seeds too early (follow label directions or read on up on them on line). If you do, they'll languish indoors too long without the powerful natural sun and get leggy and diseased. The vast majority of seeds should be started 6 to 8 weeks before your region's last average frost date. For Iowa, that means starting seeds in March.
- If houseplants are struggling, it's probably time to pitch them and replace. Otherwise, give them a good rinse, trim off brown or problem parts, and top off the soil with fresh potting soil.
- Avoid fertilizing houseplants this month. With less daylight, their need for food is less.
- If you've forced bulbs, they're probably ready to take out into light and warmth now. Once the bulbs have sent up shoots a half to one inch high, take them out and put them in the sunniest, brightest spot possible.

Notes

- Inspect any stored bulbs or corms. If you dug up any last fall to store over the winter. They should be firm and healthy looking. If they're shriveled or mildewed, toss them.
- Force branches. Once spring-blooming branches start to develop tiny buds, cut them and bring them indoors for forcing. These include forsythia, redbud, pussy willow, crabapple, and more. Just soak the branches in a tub of cold water for a few hours. Then arrange in a vase and watch them open over the next several days.
- Consider building a cold frame. Come March, it's a great way to get a head start on sowing lettuces, spinaches, radishes, and more.
- Start pruning. If you're having mild weather and want to work off some cabin fever, get out there and prune trees and shrubs.
- When shoveling snow, as long as it doesn't have salt in it and isn't slushy, don't worry about tossing it onto perennials and small shrubs. Fluffy snow is called white mulch and actually insulates against weather extremes.
- Feed the birds! February is National Bird Feeding Month. And for good reason—they really need our help this time of year.
- How's your mower? If you didn't get it tuned up last fall and the blade sharpened, take it in now before the spring rush.
- Same for any shears or other sharp cutting or slicing objects, including spades and hoes. If you haven't already, invest a few bucks in a sharpening stone. It makes all the difference. Or take them in to a place that sharpens scissors and other tools.

Notes