

PREPARING THE GARDEN

Till there was hue

By Holly Bigelow Martin

If the cold weather has given you cabin fever, take heart. There are plenty of jobs you can tackle now, indoors and out, to get a jump on the spring gardening season.

"Right now, you need to protect your shrubs and trees," says Bill Everett, manager of Parker Greenhouse and Garden Center in Scotch Plains. "Make sure that protective screening and mulch is loose and not frozen around the plants, and that stakes and ties are loosened on the guy wires so that there's no strangulation on the tree trunks."

Because February is usually dry, Everett recommends watering your broad-leaved and needle evergreens whenever there's a break in the weather. "This also is the time to check for diseases and wash the plants well to combat against insects and dust," he says. "Bagworm and bores should be sprayed. You also want to get rid of caterpillar nests hanging on your plants, so they don't kill the branch."

March is the time to plant, transplant and prune trees and shrubs while they are still dormant, and to fertilize trees, shrubs, ground cover, roses and perennials. "Be sure to read the directions on the bag or box for the type of plant you have, before going ahead with fertilization, because each one is different," says Everett. "If you're in doubt, contact your garden center or extension agent before you make a mistake."

Now is the ideal time to start planning your vegetable garden. "The main issue is to determine the size and get a preliminary layout in your mind," says Art Brown Jr., New Jersey's secretary of agriculture. "Sketch out what crops you want to plant where, then start looking at the seeds and plants available at your local garden center."

Ambitious gardeners can start their own seedlings inside while waiting for good weather. "You don't need a growlight but you need a bright, sunny window," says Bob Metzler, manager of the Benken-dorf Garden Center in Mine Hill. "There are windowsill greenhouse kits available with a plastic tray for the soil and seeds and a plastic cover that goes over the top to get them germinating and growing good."

After ordering your seeds, it's time to test your soil to see what nutrients it's lacking, and to get an estimate of how much lime, fertilizer and organic material it needs. Your county agricultural agent can do the test for a fee. Soil testing is also available through your local garden center, or you can use a commercial test kit.

Jim Shepard, manager of Du-Brow's Nursery in Livingston, suggests working composted materials into the ground in March or early April so nutrients have a chance to break down and improve the soil condition. As a general rule, he recommends adding 40 pounds of cow manure, 40 pounds of either humus or leaf mold, and 10 pounds of 5-10-5 (percentages of nitrogen to phosphorus to potash) fertilizer for every 100 square feet of garden area. Add lime if you're going to plant crops such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplant, because they need a higher pH.

Once you've applied the soil

amendments, it's time to work them in, while loosening the soil at the same time, to prepare for planting. "For a very small garden, you can use a hoe," says Shepard. "But for anything larger than 10-by-10 feet, I would recommend a tiller because you're getting into some major physical work."

You may want to put netting or fencing around the perimeter of the garden to train vining plants like cu-



Photo courtesy of J.D. Smith & Sons

Having your garden look like this in spring takes plenty of work this month and next.

cumbers and zucchini. Fences are also essential for keeping out woodchucks and rabbits that love to feast on tender green leaves.

"Use chicken wire, and dig a trench around the garden, 4 to 6 inches deep," says Bob Metzler. "Set the fence down in that, then cover it up, to deter animals from digging under it."

By March, it's time to plant early cold-weather crops like peas, lettuce or cabbage, which are frost tolerant. The planting of warm-weather crops like tomatoes, eggplants and peppers is normally done after May 10 or 15, depending on your location.

"It's better to wait an extra couple of days and not worry about them being frozen off, than to go out early and try to beat the rest of the gang," says Brown. ♦