

Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit www.islandtides.com to read the current edition and more find more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics in our extensive archive of newspapers and articles.

Reprint from Volume 21 Number 7

April 9, 2009

April Garden Calendar ~ The Good Life by Brian Crumblehulme

*When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower...*

Geoffrey Chaucer ~1380

Assuming all construction projects have been completed, the ground has been prepared, trees planted and winter debris removed, now is the time to relax into the fun jobs of sowing and planting for an abundance of vegetables and flowers.

First read the labels on the seed packages and separate those plants that require more than 100 days to mature from those that are ready sooner. Generally, crops that produce a fruit such as tomatoes, potatoes and cucumbers will require more time than crops grown for their leaves only such as lettuce, spinach and the like. Then to save time and space you can intercrop the fast growing ones with slow maturing plants.

Ideally 'seed' potatoes should be started indoors to encourage them to sprout. Then, when the shoots are about 1 inch long they can be carefully planted in trenches previously prepared with lots of compost and manure. Cover the potatoes then sow your spring salads between the rows so they can be harvested before the potatoes take over the whole ground. The cabbage family also need 120 days or so before you can enjoy them for dinner so intercrop with salads or even bush peas; if you have salads enough for an army, then a sprinkling of chervil, cilantro or marigolds will brighten up the bed.

Speaking of brassicas, and celery, now is the time to sow for late summer and fall harvests. Cabbages, caulis, tomatoes, peppers, etcetera sown in March will develop into their second or third leaf by mid-month and will begin to crowd each other in the pot. Before transplanting, prepare a potting mix similar to the seed-mix described in *Island Tides* March 26 edition but with double the compost or well-rotted manure, plus a generous handful of bonemeal and a little lime. Young plants are like teenagers with an indiscriminate voracious diet.

Then, lift your seedlings with as little damage to the roots as possible using a flat toothpick, hold them gently by one leaf so as not to damage the stems, and transfer them to larger pots or flats where they can develop for another 4-6 weeks until all

danger of frost is past. Many first-time gardeners make the mistake of leaving the growing medium too soft and loose. It is essential that the roots are pressed firmly into the soil to press out excess air so the young roots will have direct access to the necessary nutrients and water. For larger plants outside I use my feet to do this.

Melons, cucumbers and squash need heat so it is better to start these indoors for planting out in late May. However, these plants (cucurbits) do not like to have their roots disturbed by transplanting, so if you want to enjoy your cucumbers before September, the trick is to prepare 4 or 6 inch pots with a rich potting loam and place 2 seeds in each to germinate indoors. Once the seedlings have grown past the cotyledon (baby leaf) stage, pinch out the tallest or spindliest specimen to allow the other to grow into a short stronger plant.

The final part in this adventure to establish your summer garden is to set all your carefully raised young plants outside and this in turn implies hardening them off. Plants that have been raised under the protection of glass or plastic will react to direct sun the same way you do on the first day you take your shirt off for a few hours on the beach—they burn! And what is worse, if a breeze blows up and the weather turns cold, they can suffer from windburn too. Plants cannot walk away to find shelter. The faster the plant has been grown, the longer the hardening period required. Begin by setting the flats and pots outside on warm cloudy days so they will not be in direct sunlight. Take them in again at night. After a few days of this they can be exposed to short periods of sun. The leaves may turn a darker colour as they adjust to the UV. Leaving them in the rain is also good. This process can take a month or more depending on the weather. If the leaves turn white you have burned them.

This year I am having a shot at making one of those semi-wild looking flower beds that look so impressive around French and Italian chateaus. So last week I dug over a fifty-foot border by the orchard and installed a low fence of old split rails to provide an edging. I began by planting groups of rosemary bushes from cuttings taken two years ago before scattering (flinging might be a better word) saved seeds of sage, california poppy, nigella and borage, stuff the deer will not bother. I will

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with this attribution, in its entirety, with notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

This article was published (April 9, 2009) in 'Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 17,500 print copies throughout the Gulf Islands and the Canadian Strait of Georgia from Victoria to Campbell River to Howe Sound.

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com.

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

not water this area but trust that there will be enough spindly shoots to provide a continued drift of colour through the summer. If it works I will tell you all about it.

Finally, for those with a small pond, April is the time to re-pot those tired water lilies into something bigger. This exercise begins with an invigorating wade into cold water to retrieve the dormant lily crowns. Large ones should be carefully cut into smaller sections with a sharp knife while last year's roots can simply be re-potted into larger containers. Lilies need a rich loam if they are to flower well so once again a homemade mix with lots of compost and a little bone meal will go a long way. Give them plenty of room for the roots to grow, press the loam in very firmly taking care not to damage the buds around the crown, then cover the whole top of the pot with clean gravel or small stones to prevent the mix from floating away when you re-submerge them. There are over forty species of water lily (*Nymphaea*) and, with a little TLC, many will thrive in this region. Most need to be covered with water. With a little imagination they can be planted in a barrel, old bathtub, or cattle trough and can look spectacular on your after lunch walk with a glass of sangria.

Rhubarb – Rhubarb – Rhubarb!

Minted Rhubarb Sauce

Prep time: 10 minutes, cooking time: 15 minutes, makes about 4 servings.

- 1 bunch chopped fresh homegrown rhubarb,
- 1/2 chopped onion,
- 1 Tbsp butter,
- 1/2 cup sugar,
- 2-3 sprigs chopped fresh peppermint,
- 1 cup orange juice,
- salt & pepper to taste,
- dash of Tabasco (optional).

Fry the onion in the butter until soft. Add all the other ingredients, bring to a boil and simmer for 5-7 minutes. Blend until smooth and serve hot with lamb, salmon, asparagus, or in an omelette with Brie cheese, multigrain toast and a mimosa (champagne and orange juice).

Upside Down Rhubarb Muffins

Prep time: 12 minutes, bake time: about 20 minutes, makes 12 muffins.

- 1/4 cup melted butter,
- 1/2 cup brown sugar,
- 1 cup finely chopped rhubarb.

Mix these together and spoon into buttered muffin tins.

- 2 cups pastry flour,
- 1/2 cup sugar,
- 4 tsp Magic baking powder
- 1 tsp fresh grated lemon rind,
- 1/3 cup melted butter
- 2 large island eggs,
- 2/3 cup milk,
- pinch of salt.

Sift all the dry ingredients and mix together. Beat the eggs, milk and butter until fluffy and fold into the dry mixture without stirring. (You do not want to dissolve the glutenins which will make the muffins tough.) Pour the mix over the rhubarb in the tins and bake at 375°F for about 20 minutes. Cool for ten minutes and turn out onto a rack upside down.

You will need help finishing these so invite your neighbours in for cappuccino. ☺