



## Spring Will Come

By Carol Quish, UConn Home and Garden Education Center



February is short on days, but long on hope. Hope for spring, warmer weather and the start of the earth reawakening. Birds will soon start their morning singing in hopes of attracting a mate. Tree flower buds will swell and open, offering their pollen and nectar to a new generation of insects and in return receive fertilization resulting in the production of seed and the germination of new trees. Colorful flowering bulbs will emerge brightening the drab landscape. Such is the circle of life, which can be strongly felt in the hopes of February.

We can hope for a great gardening season in each of our own little corners of the earth by doing some chores now even though it is still technically winter. On the warmer days when the sun is inviting us to go out and enjoy it, survey your yard, plot or garden. What plants look like they weathered the winter well? Note the ones looking bedraggled. Freeze and thaw cycles will heave plants out of the ground and can break roots. If the ground is soft enough, heal them back in or at least cover with leaves or mulch until the soil thaws. Those may need replanting entirely when the soil is more friable. Coral bells are commonly victims of heaving and will appreciate a layer of mulch covering their roots next fall. Add this chore to your garden journal or calendar to help remember.

Five, six, pickup sticks. Gather the grandchildren or neighborhood kids to help pickup fallen twigs and branches, and recite the old nursery rhymes that helped get the chores done. The promise of toasting marshmallows using the fruits of their labor in a fire pit makes a good incentive. Rake off stray leaves from the lawn before grass growth begins to avoid dead spots.

Check the forsythia for bud swell and take some cuttings to force into flower inside. Just put them in a large vase of water inside a warm home and wait for them to open. Cherry blossoms are another good forcing shrub. Make all the branch cuts at an angle to encourage maximum water uptake. Early witch-hazel and spicebush will release fabulous fragrance once blooming inside.

Prune fruit trees while still dormant and evergreens before they begin their spring growth. Wait to prune spring flowering shrubs until after they flower or you will be cutting off their flower buds. These include azaleas, rhododendrons and big leaf hydrangeas. Cut back ornamental grasses to about two inches tall. Rake perennial beds, gradually exposing plants showing some green growth. Remove ratty, winter damaged leaves making way for fresh, new growth to come. Avoid raking early spring bulb areas containing early bloomers such as snowdrops and scilla to prevent damaging tender tips.

Another chore made easier while the leaves have not yet come out, is scouting for and scraping off the gypsy moth egg masses. Each egg mass can contain hundreds of eggs, which will hatch into hundreds of gypsy moth caterpillars. If you have had high populations of caterpillars and much damage in past years, look for the buff colored, fuzzy egg masses on tree bark, and crush them.



If you chose to put down crabgrass preventer, apply it when forsythia is in full bloom. The same ground temperatures needed for crabgrass seed to germinate occurs at the same time forsythia is at its peak. The window for crabgrass seed germination ends when the lilacs bloom. Just remember to put down the herbicide between forsythia and lilac blooming.

If you have hemlock trees check the branches for white, fluffy egg masses of hemlock woolly adelgid at the base of where the needles attach to the twigs. Eggs will hatch in April. Mark journal or calendar to apply horticultural oil in April once the crawlers emerge. It is easier to kill the newly hatched crawlers than the waxy covered eggs.

February is a good time to take stock of potting containers. If reusing ornamental pots or containers for starting seed, clean them well and sanitize with a 10% bleach to 90% water solution to eliminate any overwintering diseases. Smart starts make clean gardens.

If you have old seed and not sure if it is viable or will grow, do a germination test. Place 10 seeds on moistened paper towel, fold over or cover with another moistened paper towel. Slide towels and seeds into a plastic bag and seal it. Wait the allotted number of days for germination as stated on the seed packet to see how many sprouted. If 5 of the 10 showed signs of life by putting out a root or a shoot, there is 50% germination in that packet of seed. You will have to sow twice as much than if seed was fresh.

For questions on these or other spring gardening chores or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.