February in Your Garden - 2013
By Vicki Sullivan

Despite the cold and rain, it’s time for serious gardeners to get into the garden, and all wanna bees as well. At least wait until the soil is not waterlogged so you don’t compact your soil. If you laid down a layer of compost last month, now is the time to spread a layer of mini-mulch to help keep down the weeds. Be careful to keep the mulch at least an inch away from the main stem of plants or the trunk of a tree, to prevent rot.

By now, the roses really should be trimmed, especially removing all leaves and those dog legs that denote old pruning cuts. Wait until the end of the month to prune hydrangeas and to cut back frost damaged shrubs. Also at the end of the month, prune shrubs if you don’t like their shape, and prune hedges before spring growth emerges.

If you want to plant roses, berries or fruit trees, they are still cheaper than spring or summer purchases, because they are still called “bare root”, but most garden nurseries are now potting up anything bare root, because their stock is drying out. This is a good time to look ahead to summer in the garden. Plant dahlia, lilies, gladiolus.

And just before spring growth, you can divide summer bloomers like agapanthus, daylilies, asters, rudbeckia. I dig up dahlias that have been in the ground for two years. Since finding an eye on the neck of a dahlia is tricky, and sometimes guess work, last February I dug up my dahlias and planted my guesswork tubers in gallon containers. Those that sprouted either got planted or given away to friends. I had some that sprouted as late as June. I keep track of dahlias with my labeling system of a sharpie on the tuber if I store the tuber over winter, or I cut off a piece of a miniblind, apply laminated tape from a Brother Labeler, and stick the label in the pot.

Regarding pest control, this is prime season for slugs and snails, especially when my favorite dahlias poke their heads up. If I am not vigilant, off go their heads. I go hand picking with a flashlight at night, and I have switched to Sluggo as a bait, since it is safer around children and vegetables. If your fruit trees had peach leaf curl last year, now is the time to spray with a dormant spray, before the buds open. I use lime sulfur with a sticker spreader when there is no sign of rain for a few days.

At the end of the month, feed perennials, all shrubs, and trees with an all-purpose fertilizer. Remember to wait until after they bloom to feed rhodies, camellias, gardenias, and azaleas with an acid fertilizer. Roses have a different schedule. After pruning them, I give them an all-purpose fertilizer and then two weeks later encourage flower growth with a high-phosphorous fertilizer. I got a great rose feeding schedule after taking a rose pruning class from Filoli. I will make it available at the February garden club meeting.

Many years ago I took a class on houseplants, and I have followed the advice I received, resulting in happy houseplants. I feed houseplants on a regular basis with a three-month fertilizer spikes (I use Jobe’s from a garden supply store). I discontinue fertilizer at Thanksgiving, and then treat the house plants to lots of love around Valentine’s Day. If there are no roots coming out the bottom of the plant, I poke the soil all over with a long bladed bread knife, and pour at least a gallon of water through the soil, to leach out left over fertilizer. The rest of the houseplants go outside for soil removal, trimming back of old roots, and a diluted milk bath to clean the leaves. Next they all get new SuperSoil, my indoor planting soil of choice, and then they return to their perches, with fresh fertilizer.

Outside my sunny kitchen window I used to plant annuals. Two years ago I challenged myself to grow lettuce year round. I tried growing lettuce from seed – too many distractions. Now I plant a six-pack of leafy greens every four weeks, squeezing the new lettuce under the leaves of the most mature plants. I harvest lettuce with scissors so that I never run out of lettuce leaves. Once they are established, lettuce even ignores a freeze. If you have some pots, you can grow lettuce outside your back door. Just remember to water the lettuce, and tuck the pots close to a sheltered area during our cold winter nights.