

# The Garden in March

By Rachel Anderson

Over the winter I took advantage of the "off" season by taking a few classes (actually, a lot of classes!) in hopes of honing my skills as a gardener and exposing myself to new ideas. They ranged from raising goats to keeping honey bees, and from identifying garden pests to heirloom vegetables that do well in the PNW (check out cabbage 'January King' and corn 'Blue Jade'. I'm really looking forward to trying these!). However, one class that still gets me kind of excited (well, ok- they all got me pretty excited and inspired) was one about edible weeds. Now, I know what you're thinking. Eat weeds?! Aren't they poisonous and to be treated with a healthy dose of Roundup or introduced to the weed version of torture known to all as the Hori-Hori knife - or both? Weeds are bad! We as gardeners know this as second nature. Well. Not so, gardening friends. It turns out that most of the weeds we regard as pests and invaders of our paradise are not only edible but highly nutritious!

Take for example shot weed. You know the one! It shoots its seeds directly into your eyes and out into the garden bed without mercy! Its botanical name is *Cardamine hirsuta* (yes, even weeds have botanical names. They're plants too, after all!). Its taste is bitter, but not in a bad way. It also tastes a little peppery, like nasturtiums (please tell me you've eaten nasturtiums!) and is an excellent ingredient in salads. Cool, right? And then there are dandelions, lambs quarter (*Chenopodium album*), cat's ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*) and so many more.

The wonderful lady who introduced me to the unorthodox idea of eating weeds is Melany Vorass Herrera of Seattle and she has a book out on the subject called "The Front Yard Forager". I recommend looking for it and seeing what she has to say. Not only is it like an encyclopedia of weeds, but it has recipes too! In her class, Melany mentioned that when her shot weed goes to seed, she flicks the seed head, causing the seeds to scatter and find a new home (I sure hope she wears protective eye wear when she does that!). I admit that I groaned and cringed at the idea, but after having a taste for myself I thought that maybe she's not so crazy after all! I may not go so far as to flick the seed heads, but I might pause for a moment before I pull the plant and decide if I want shot weed in my salad that night or not.

So, now that you know that some weeds are a good thing, here's what to do to work around them this month:

## In the ornamental garden:

- If you haven't already ventured out to remove the old stalks of perennials, then on the next goodish day make time to do so. This very simple task really helps to banish the bare wintery look and give a sense of tidiness and a good fresh start to the season. Think of it as spring cleaning for the garden.
- Fertilize Rhododendrons, especially if they're fairly new to your garden. Use a specific rhododendron/azalea fertilizer which helps to provide the right PH level. If you know your soil is acidic or slightly so already, then an all-purpose

slow release fertilizer is just fine. If you don't know the PH level of your soil where your rhodies are planted, then test your soil. The Nursery carries an easy to use test kit, or you could send a soil sample to a lab to have a complete analysis. Generally, with rhododendrons you want to fertilize in early spring when the flower buds begin to swell, and again at leaf emergence-usually late May early June depending on the variety. Not sure how to identify a flower bud vs. a leaf bud? A flower bud is big and fat and full of flowery potential. A leaf bud is slim and narrow, full of....leafy potential. Or, you could ask one of us at the Nursery to show you the difference.

- March is the last call for bare root trees, shrubs, and berries. At the beginning of April we pot them all up and the prices go up, so seize the day and buy bare root in March!
- Wrap up your fruit tree and rose pruning.
- Shear your hedge. If you've got a row of yew or boxwood or emerald greens planted as a hedge, now is a great time to prune or shear them to keep their dense uniformity.
- Our spring bulbs are in at the Nursery. That means dahlias, lilies, gladiolas, begonias, and more! We also have organic seed potatoes, garlic, and shallots.
- There are a few tough annuals that can be directly sown into the garden, such as calendula, sweet alyssum, breadseed poppies, larkspur, love-in-a-mist, and sweet peas. Don't forget the sweet peas!

### **In the veggie garden:**

- Remove straw mulch from asparagus and garlic. Look for the beginnings of asparagus spears and the tips of garlic. At this point, the straw will only harbor slugs and snails, which nobody needs.
- Prune and thin out unproductive raspberry canes.
- Sow peas and other cool crop veggies if you haven't already done so. Plants like radish, arugula, parsley, cilantro, spinach, kale, and Swiss chard can all be sown directly into the garden in March.
- Plant potatoes. St. Patrick's Day is a good general rule of thumb for us in the Pacific Northwest.
- Sow seed indoors for tomatoes and peppers. With supplemental heat and light, they'll be ready to plant out in May assuming the weather is good.



There's an awful lot to be excited about this time of year and the anticipation is perhaps the most delicious part of it all. I find myself taking slow walks around the garden, looking for points of new growth on herbaceous perennials and swelling flower buds on shrubs and trees, looking most of all for the signs that tell me that a new emergence is happening and that a new season is upon us.

Conclusion:

Enjoy your salad