

# Gardening Basics: Early-Season Garden Checklist

If you live in a warm climate, your cool-season crops may already be planted. You might even have harvested a few hardy greens! But for many of us, spring planting is still weeks or months away.

Although it can be tempting to get out in the garden on the first warm, sunny day, it's important to wait until the soil has dried out before starting to work in the beds. In the meantime, there's plenty to do to prepare for the upcoming growing season.

**Clean and disinfect seed-starting pots.** If you'll be starting seeds indoors and reusing old pots and trays, give them a good scrubbing. Then disinfect them with a 10% bleach solution (1 part bleach to 9 parts water).

**Inspect raised beds,** looking for areas that are bowed or splintered, or corners that are coming apart. Repair what you can, and, if necessary, replace damaged boards. Is there space and resources (time and money) to install additional beds?

**Take stock of garden paths.** If the paths are mulched, do they need raking smooth? As soon as the ground has thawed, pull any weeds that have sprouted over the winter. Are there so many weeds that an overhaul is in order? Removing existing mulch, laying down fresh weed block, and covering it with new mulch will minimize weeding chores throughout the growing season.

**Check trellises and other plant supports.** Are they still in good shape and sturdy enough to hold up plants? Make any necessary repairs to ensure they're structurally sound. Consider painting them if you have a place to do so — it may need to be a heated area indoors. Letting the kids choose the colors will help get them excited for the upcoming season.

**Tidy up perennial beds.** Cut old stems back to within an inch or so of the crown — the part of the plant that sits at or just above the soil line, where this year's stems will emerge. Look carefully to make sure you don't damage any early stems. Keep an eye out for perennials that have heaved up out of the ground due to freeze/thaw cycles and carefully push them back into the ground.

**Apply bark mulch.** A fresh coat of mulch can really dress up a perennial bed. However, don't allow mulch to build up so that it's deeper than 3-4" or it can smother roots and prevent water from reaching soil. If you want to add fresh mulch for decorative purposes, you'll need to remove some of the existing mulch (it can be added to the compost pile) and then "top dress" with fresh mulch.

**Cut back ornamental grasses.** Depending on the type of grass, you may be able to use pruners, or you may need something more aggressive, like a saw or hori knife. If so, this is definitely a job for an experienced adult with a pair of thick gloves! (Be careful; some grasses have sharp edges that can cause painful cuts to the skin.)

**Divide overcrowded perennials and grasses.** If perennial plants are dying out in the center but growing fine around the perimeter, that's a sure sign it's time to divide them. You'll want to divide them as soon as the ground has thawed. You can use the divisions to expand



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your perennial bed, or pot up the divisions to give away or to sell to raise money for garden projects.

**Maintain pruners and other tools.** Sharpen pruners and loppers and lubricate the hinges. Clean spades and garden forks by first using a wire brush to remove dried-on soil, then steel wool to remove rust. (Wear gloves for these tasks!)

**Prepare irrigation systems.** Hopefully, the system was drained last fall and carefully stored. If not, take stock of the various components and see what, if anything, is missing or damaged. Make sure you have the hoses and nozzles you need.

**Start recruiting volunteers.** Make sure you are ready to hit the ground running when warm weather returns by beginning to recruit your garden volunteers now. Keeping your average last frost date in mind, tentatively plan a few workdays to kick off your spring garden season.