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## Do This, Not That in March

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Ready, set, get your soil thermometer. During March, soil temperatures will rise—and with warmer soil will come the first verdant blush. Don't be fooled, however, by the early signs of spring, or by the barrage of fertilizer ads. We need at least three days of soil temperatures at 55 degrees before it is time to begin fertilizing lawns and gardens.

The full burst of forsythia blossoms is a good indicator of soil temperature. Think mid-April. Fertilizer spread before that date may be wasted. Plants cannot absorb it yet.

Worse, early fertilizer may run into water bodies during storms, creating nitrogen and phosphorous pollution. The message is simple: No fertilizer before its time!

Anyway, if you want to work outdoors, there's so much else to do.

First, get a soil test, or several, as soon as you can sink a shovel at least six inches deep. Request separate reports for lawn, flower, and veggie gardens, as well as meadow plantings and shrub beds. They all have different soil requirements. Be sure to ask for a report on soil organic matter. If organic matter is below five to eight percent, soil health is compromised. If road salt is an issue, request a report on salts. If you want to use organic fertilizers, be sure to make a specific request for that report. See the end of this article for soil test sources.

Does the test recommend lime? Apply lime earlier than fertilizer, when soil is frost-free. That usually occurs by mid- to late March.

The soil test may call for either calcitic or dolomitic lime. This fine point is worth noting. These two types of lime correct different soil deficiencies.

It is also worth noting that many garden centers offer fast-acting lime, a product well worth consideration. Conventional lime can take up to 14 months to have full effect. Fast-acting lime can work in 8 to 12 weeks. Unlike conventional lime, it does not require multiple applications.

Here are some other ideas for March, aside from the usual clean-up:

Cover bare soil with mulch. Straw bales or chopped straw will do the job well. Straw is available at some garden centers and almost all animal feed stores. Remember, though, that straw and hay are not the same product. Use only straw for mulch.

Turn compost piles, including last year's leaves. As temperatures increase, so will the microbial activity that turns dead vegetation into black gold. Turning speeds and improves the process.

Deadhead ornamental grass. March is the perfect time.

Plant moss. Yes, pick up moss patches and place them on bare soil where grass will not grow. Moss thrives on consistent moisture, above all else, and spring is a good time to promote a dense bed of these tiny plants. After placing the moss patch, walk on it, often. That helps the moss attach to the soil surface.

Plant milk jug gardens. Plastic milk jugs provide just enough protection and humidity to overcome the challenges of late winter and early spring weather. To prepare the planting: Use either quart or gallon jugs. Discard the lid. Slice the jug horizontally on three sides to make an opening. Pierce the bottom of the jug several times to create drainage holes. Fill the bottom with four inches of potting soil. Sow the seeds. (Think spinach, arugula, kale, mache, mini carrots, or lettuce.) Put the severed top back in place. Then use duct tape to adhere the top to the bottom. Place the jug outdoors. That is it! There's no need to water or fertilize. Before you know it, you'll harvest veggies directly from the milk jugs.

Build cold frames. Cold frames provide about a two-week head start on the growing season and as much as four extra weeks at the end of the season.

Soil test resources: UConn's Soil Nutrient Analysis Lab: [www.soiltest.uconn.edu/sampling.php](http://www.soiltest.uconn.edu/sampling.php) or 860-486-4274. Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station: [ct.gov/caes](http://ct.gov/caes) or 203-974-8521. Harrington's Organics: [Harringtonsorganic.com](http://Harringtonsorganic.com) or call 800-675-8733.

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