

Gardeners' Checklist for April

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

Caladiums come in a single color or in a mosaic of colors to provide elegant beauty to local landscapes.

April is a wonderful time to enjoy the outdoor garden, especially when you and your family have quarantined due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is fortunate that landscapes have transitioned from the dull brown colors of winter to the vibrant colors of spring as this helps to remind gardeners of the joys of gardening in the Upper Texas Gulf Coast region.

My 'Early Girl' tomato plants have already set quarter-size fruits so I am looking forward to harvesting some tasty tomatoes in a few weeks. My cucumber plants are also growing well. I prefer to grow Burpee's 'Pickler' which produces small-size pickling type cucumbers that I also find to be excellent for fresh consumption. I rather like their crunchy texture and thin skins.

Pickling type cucumbers go well with tomatoes to provide for an inexpensive, easy-to-make and a so refreshing salad to eat on a warm summer day. My recipe for this salad also includes red onions, green bell peppers, olive oil or Italian vinaigrette, and salt and pepper. When combined and mixed well, this culinary adventure provides an amazing combination of





flavors and textures.

Experiencing cabin fever from the quarantine has caused me to digress from the goal of this column. Even though mixing cucumbers, tomatoes, red onions and green bell peppers to create a salad made from freshly harvested vegetables is really a glorious thing, I'm reminded that this is not a food column so I must return to providing gardening advice to my readers.

Here's a checklist for keeping up with the chores while enjoying the pleasures of April.

AZALEAS: As flowering finishes, evaluate your azaleas for needed pruning. April and May are good months to trim your bushes, but only do it if it is necessary. Generally, a little shaping is all that is required. Controlling size is a common reason for pruning, especially if large-growing cultivars were planted where smaller ones should have been used.

You should begin to manage the size of your azaleas when they reach the maximum desirable size. Unless you are trying to create a formal clipped hedge, avoid shearing azaleas with hedge clippers because this destroys their attractive natural shape. It is better to use hand pruners to selectively remove or shorten selected branches to achieve the desired shape and size.

First, identify the tallest or widest shoots or branches on a bush that are too large then prune the branch

back a few inches inside the interior of shrub growth. When the shortened branch sprouts, the new growth will be inside the shrub creating a thicker, fuller plant. And the new growth will not immediately stick out above the rest of the bush — something that commonly happens if pruning cuts are made just back to the edge of the bush or when azaleas are sheared.

Keep pruning back the tallest and widest shoots until the shrub is the proper size. You may continue to prune occasionally as needed using this technique into the summer up until late June (early July at the very latest). After that, the chances increase that you will remove flower buds when you prune. Alternate-season-blooming azaleas, such as the Encores, have a shorter window or opportunity, and pruning on them should be done as soon as the major spring blooming period is over.

LAWNS: Mid-March to mid-April is the recommended time period to fertilize lawns. A good way to determine when to fertilize is to wait until you have mowed the predominant lawn grass twice.

If you fertilize too early, you will be fertilizing the winter weeds! This allows time for the grass to green up naturally without pushing it into growth. Use a 3-1-2 ratio fertilizer (such as 15-5-10) and distribute with a broadcast (cyclone) spreader. Uniform distribution is essential to prevent light and dark streaks in the lawn.

STORING LEFTOVER SEED: Many flower or vegetable seeds left over after planting the garden can be saved for the next season by closing the packets with tape or paper clips and storing in a tightly sealed glass jar in your refrigerator until needed. Adding 1 or 2 tablespoons of powdered milk in a cloth bag to reduce the humidity within the jar can also be very beneficial to maintaining long-term seed viability.

CALADIUMS: If you asked me what some of my favorite plants for summer color are, caladiums would absolutely be at the top of my list. Caladiums are ideal for both novice and experienced gardeners because they are so easy to grow. You would be hard-pressed to find a plant that provides such reliable color in areas that get shade. Select caladium tubers while there are ample stocks available but do not plant caladiums too early.

Caladiums typically should be planted from April into early May. Caladiums need warm soil temperatures (at least 70 degrees) for best growth. Caladiums produce delightful color splashes of white, pink, rose, red, burgundy, chartreuse or green, often with several colors combining in wonderful patterns to provide elegant beauty to local landscapes. Their bright leaves with bold textures embellish our shady gardens from May until October, when the tubers go dormant. Caladiums are remarkably free from major insect or disease problems.

