

The Press Democrat  
May 03, 2025

## Hint: Start May with compost

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS  
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Buy some compost or start making your own to build up healthy soil and happy plants. Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat.

Sustainable Communities Begin with Compost. That is the theme of International Compost Awareness Week May 4-10. This year's theme was inspired by The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Number 11 - "Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable."

One way to help achieve that goal is to work together to raise public awareness on why we all should be composting our organics and using compost to create healthier soil ([compostfoundation.org](http://compostfoundation.org)).

Composting converts complex organic residues into nutrients that are slowly released into the soil as simpler forms needed by plants.

Plant residues such as leaves, grass clippings, manure and chipped and shredded wood, as well as food wastes, paper, and cardboard are broken down by numerous insects and microorganisms.

The decomposition process may be fast-acting when ingredients are fresh, aerated, moist, balanced and tended; or it may take place slowly over long periods when organic materials are left on their own.

Eventually, all organics decompose but the resulting compost is such a key ingredient in gardening that rapid or short-term production is often the most desired ingredient in successful gardens.

This is a good time to consider backyard home composting. To learn more about composting basics, building a compost hot pile, composting with worms (vermiculture) and other helpful tips visit our website [sonomamg.ucanr.edu](http://sonomamg.ucanr.edu).

If you don't have room or the desire to compost at home, please make sure you are using your municipal green bin for your food waste.

Zero Waste Sonoma has a helpful guide to "what goes where" when putting items in your green organics, blue recycling and gray landfill bins.

### **It's time to plant**

Spring rains have subsided and temperatures are warming. It's the time we gardeners have all been waiting for — planting. Veggie starts and flowering annual and perennial plants should be readily available in nurseries, garden centers and plant sales.

May is time to plant beans, cucumbers, eggplant, kale, lettuce, melons, peppers, squash, and tomatoes. When choosing starts, don't buy a plant that already is forming fruit. It's been in the container too long. Tomatoes and peppers should be wider than they are tall. Check not only for healthy green foliage but also make sure the roots are healthy and not matted by gently easing the plant out of the container to verify. Consider choosing varieties with fewer days-to-maturity and production and labeled "drought-resistant" or "drought-tolerant" in the variety description.

Acclimate transplants started indoors before planting them in garden beds. Harden off transplants by setting pots outdoors during the day and moving them indoors at night for a few days before leaving them outdoors for several more days. Tender seedlings may succumb to drastic changes.

Add edible flowers to your garden for a pop of color and to attract beneficial insects that pollinate the garden and provide an ecological balance against harmful pests. Common edible flowers include carnations, violas, lilacs, roses, lavender, marigolds and nasturtiums. You can also enjoy the flowers of herbs such as rosemary, basil, thyme and sage. If you don't have a dedicated vegetable garden, consider planting a

few veggies in the ornamental garden. Leafy greens in particular make attractive additions to beds and borders.

### **Pruning**

Overly vigorous fruit trees, trees that are too large or fruit trees that were not sufficiently pruned because of the wet winter, may be summer-pruned from the end of May into July. Pruning reduces the production of fruit, but less fruit requires less water. Cherries and most peaches can be pruned after the fruit is harvested. At a minimum, remove upright waterspouts emerging from branches and suckers emerging from the tree roots or base. These thin branchlets do not flower or fruit and they compete for water and nutrients.

Most fruit trees benefit from fruit thinning; a favorable fruit-to-leaf ratio promotes large fruit. In general, space fruit every four to six inches along a branch or leave one fruit per spur, but keep the largest fruit even if unevenly spaced. Remove small and damaged fruit. Cherry trees, which do not need fruit thinning, are an exception to this practice.

Deadhead and prune azaleas, rhododendrons and camellias after they have finished blooming. To remove the spent flowers of rhododendrons, use clippers or two fingers to nip just above the two new leaflets. During the spring and summer, feed these shrubs monthly with a balanced organic fertilizer formulated for acid-loving plants.

Prune all spring-flowering trees and shrubs when bloom is past.

Tidy up spent wildflowers. Rather than pulling them all up, you may want to let some go to seed. You can also collect the seeds for planting next fall.

It may be time to harvest the garlic you planted last fall. If about half the tops of the garlic bulbs have died back or are falling over, it's time to harvest. To avoid cracking the garlic open, lift or dig bulbs out of the soil rather than pulling them. Brush off soil and allow bulbs to dry outdoors in the sun for 2-3 weeks until skins become papery. Gently clean the cured bulbs with a soft bristle brush taking care not to strip off the papery skin and cut off roots to about 1 inch. Store in a cool, dark, dry place.

*Contributors to this week's column were Diane Judd and Debbie Westrick.*