

February 2018

February is the time to start things off, buy your first early potato tubers a good first early is a variety called Rocket. These tubers need to be chitted, this means placing them in a warm light place in a tray or egg boxes are ideal with the dried stalk end facing down [*you should just about see a small thin piece if dried up stalk where it was connected to the mother plant at one end, place this end downwards*].



After a couple of weeks, you will have small shoots appearing, by then its March and they can be planted out second week of March, plant 120mm down and wait. Continuing the vegetable theme, you can sow some early peas and broad beans, look out for early varieties like Douce Provence and Feltham First, and for broad beans try Aquadulce and the Sutton. These are available most places, sow them into module trays or 3-4 seeds in a 3" pot, once they germinate place some were bright and cool for a few days then to harden off plant out into the veg plot, if you have some horticultural fleece place over and weight it down at the edges, this helps them get established and keep birds off... check weekly. Other seeds to sow into modules are beetroot, swiss Chard, mixed salad leaves, spring onions and early cabbage.

Life is starting to return to the flower beds with shoots breaking the soil surface, if you haven't already mulched these plants then do so. If they are large clumps you can split and replant them into several smaller clumps or replant the strongest looking plants either elsewhere in the garden or throw onto the compost heap. If you didn't sow sweet peas in the autumn, you can sow them now, using the same method as the edible peas described earlier. You can also start to sow your bedding plant seeds, there is a vast choice out there so grow what you fancy and are comfortable growing, just follow the instructions on the packet and you cannot go far wrong. I always treat this month as the last to plant bare rooted trees and shrubs I know they say March but that's okay at a push. You see, the plants must make roots while the ground is moist and cool and March into April can be dry-ish months these days, (last year April rain fall was just 15 mm very dry for April) and if you have not long planted bare rooted plants they will suffer as excessive watering encourages shallow roots.

Have a look at your lawn later on this month, on a dry day give it a rake with a Springtime rake, this removes a lot of thatch and dead grass. Next month give it a dressing of spring fertilizer a light dose at first. Now is the time to get bare rooted dahlias, begonia tubers and lily bulbs. Plant them into appropriate sized pots and keep in a bright frost-free place, ensure the compost is just on the moist side. Down here at Howbury Hall its all go, we are concentrating on the newly created 'sunken woodland garden'. Lining the path edges with logs in some places in other areas the soil comes down to path so that the planting can in time take on a more natural feel/appearance, the bark chipping for the pathway is going down as we work our way through this area. Planting is also on going, moving excessive clumps of plants from elsewhere in the garden and replanting in large drifts.



Last month the large Copper Beech came down in the strong winds (which created a big job clearing up this area) measuring it on the ground it would have stood about 80 feet tall. A lot of timbers in a tree like this, more logs and brash to chip, leaving us with an enormous tree trunk as a 'garden feature' it looks a bit like a giant Caterpillar, too big to move or cut up but once I have planted around it...it will look okay. This area has been opened up in recent months what with the Large Cedar losing several branches in the snow before Christmas this has given us the opportunity to replant with shrubs and a few trees. Watch this space or that space... the gardens will be open for one day this year in aid of the Red Cross charity, date to be announced later.

Martin Roberts M.C.I.Hort

Head Gardener Howbury Hall Renhold.