



OFFICE OF THE SHERIFF

Sheriff Curtis L. Landers
225 W. Olive Street
Newport, Oregon 97365
(541) 265-4277
Fax (541) 265-4926

TIP OF THE WEEK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Sheriff Curtis L. Landers
(541) 265-0652
clanders@co.lincoln.or.us

15 EASY GARDENING PROJECTS TO KICK OFF SPRING

If you're self-quarantined or lying low for a couple of weeks, there's no reason you can't get outside and enjoy some fresh air. In fact, it's the best thing for you! For starters, there's no problem social distancing when it's just you and the squirrels and the sparrows out there. And being outdoors is good for your mental health. Even if it's still chilly in your part of the country, bundle up and get some gardening therapy. Trust us: Digging in the dirt will take your mind off the craziness.

Here are a few garden projects to help you stay sane while you're isolated:

Clean up your garden- There's something satisfying about bringing order to your little part of the world. We promise it's cathartic to rip out dead annuals, yank early weed seedlings, and remove sticks and leaf debris from your beds and lawn.

Trim your shrubs- It's fine to prune broken branches, but wait a little before shaping spring-flowering shrubs such as forsythia or hydrangea. If you cut them back now, you'll remove this year's blooms! However, you can now shape summer-flowering shrubs such as butterfly bush or

potentilla. If you're in doubt *at all* about what you have, wait until things begin to leaf out fully, *then* shape

Make your own compost- Why not make “black gold” from all that kitchen and yard waste you've been throwing out? Fruit and vegetable peels, coffee grounds, and yard waste such as grass clippings can be added to the compost pile instead of tossed. While a DIY compost bin requires a few basic materials you may or may not have on hand (like chicken wire), a compost pile doesn't need anything but yard space! Find everything you need to know about how to compost here.

Scrub down your garden furniture and deck- If you've got a power washer, great. If not, a bucket of soapy water and scrub brush work fine! Remove last year's grime on all surfaces top to bottom, then let it all air dry. If needed, add a new coat of paint or spray paint (it works on everything!) to brighten worn furniture. And, yes, paint is sold online so you don't have to leave your house.

Create a garden journal- When it's time to plant again next year, you're not going to remember what flower did well, or what variety of tomato was a total dud and not worth the trouble. Save yourself the frustration, and grab a notebook to start jotting down stuff you need to know to become a better gardener: where you planted the beans last year so you can rotate crops, what did great, what didn't. Scribble down ideas, tape plant tags to the pages, and sketch out plans for new garden beds. Now is the time to daydream about all those projects you'd love to tackle!

Grow a salad garden- If you don't have the energy or room to dig up part of your yard for a garden, plant greens! You only need a small pot or a window box to yield plenty of baby greens for your table. Mesclun (a mix of lettuces), spinach, and arugula can be planted in the same container. Sprinkle seeds, cover lightly with ¼” soil, and keep moist. In about a month, you will be able to start snipping off baby greens. It's (almost) instant gratification! Plenty of companies ship seeds, so start shopping.

Start warm weather veggies indoors- This is a bit more ambitious, but if you have space, try your hand at growing your own plants—such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplants—from seed. Then you'll be able to transplant them into your garden later. Besides seeds and seed starting

you'll also ideally have grow light. But it's okay to try raising your babies on a window sill if you're stuck indoors and don't have any other options.

Divide crowded perennials- In most of the country, the soil has warmed up enough to be worked. It's a good time to divide perennials that have overgrown their space before they begin their growth cycle. Dividing yields more plants, and it keeps them healthier as some established clumps, especially irises, tend thin in the middle after several years in the same place.

Make a DIY rain barrel- Collecting rainwater from your roof saves money and reduces the amount of runoff from your property to the sewer system (lawns or driveways may have oil residue, road salt, pesticide or fertilizer that ends up in local streams and rivers), says Penn State Extension. The simplest method is to place a barrel or large storage tub under your house's downspout; just make sure it's covered so it's not a drowning risk for small kids, pets or wildlife. If you want a more advanced version with a spigot or hose attached to fill watering cans, here's how to do it.

Upcycle unused clutter into a planter- Old garden boots, a basket that's just been collecting dust, a dented colander, glass jars or even cans from all those canned goods you've been using lately make creative (and totally free!) planters. Poke around in your cabinets or closets for items that can hold soil, drill some drain holes, then use them to plant early spring flower seeds such as pansies and violas.

Build a garden trellis- What do you have lying around that you can use to construct a simple garden trellis? Long branches can be lashed together on one end to make a tepee or ladder form (zip ties are super-helpful for this!). Or string twine back and forth between two stakes set in the ground. You can train all kinds of plants up your trellis, including morning glories, pole beans, and cucumbers.

DIY a potting bench- Old table, nightstand or dresser you never use? Convert it to a potting bench! Drag it outside, add a little paint to dress it up, distress it lightly with sandpaper, or use it as is. And when we can start entertaining again, toss a pretty tablecloth on it and use it as an outdoor buffet for gatherings.

Prepare your tools- Gather your tools, such as hand spades and pruners, and take stock of their conditions. If you didn't clean them before putting away for the winter, wash surfaces with soap and water (if you don't want to use up your bleach) to remove sap and disease spores so you don't transfer to a new plant this year. Rusty tools? Try soaking them in a strong black tea bath, says the University of Vermont. Or use sandpaper or a wire bristle brush if they're extra-rusty. Tighten loose screws and bolts on handles, and you're good to go!

Design plant markers- Create some from craft materials you may on hand such as wine corks or paint sticks, or from found materials such as river stones or twigs that you can whittle down one side to make flat for marking. Acrylic paint, permanent markers, or stamps can dress them up and make it easier to remember where you planted what or to locate perennials before they pop up every spring.

Feed the birds- Birdwatching brings joy any time of year, and with many species migrating now, you may get to see one that wouldn't ordinarily visit your feeders! We'll give you all the pointers you need here, or mix up marvel meal, a high-energy seed and peanut butter food, that can be smeared into tree bark or pine cones. It's also easy to make suet or nectar for hummingbirds, which have already returned to southern climates, with these bird-approved recipes from the National Audubon Society. Seeing and hearing your happy, little visitors will lift your spirits.

**Information from <https://www.housebeautiful.com/>