

Spring Fever in the Garden

Spring fever, according to Wikipedia, 'refers to several sets of physical and psychological symptoms associated with the arrival of spring'. Some kind of primal '*warmer weather - must dig*' response is triggered along with the blossom on the trees, drawing us out into our gardens. Something deep inside us stirs, for who could ignore the beauty of this season and not be entranced by new growth, intoxicated by delicious perfumes, beguiled by a riot of colour or a patch of carefully orchestrated tones – who could resist the urge to plant?

Long ago I realised that, for people like me, there was no immunisation against Spring fever with its imperative to rejuvenate and create anew in the garden. It is always very pleasing to meet fellow sufferers. We recognise each other by the anticipatory look in our shining eyes as we describe our latest garden projects.

I have a severe case of spring fever this year with classic symptoms of both the creation bug and the tidying up virus. On the creation side, I have laid out an extensive new garden at the nursery and put in many plants that I have not grown before. There will be drifts of bell-shaped penstemons, reliable long flowering osteospermums (African daisies) in golds and pinks, mounds of species geraniums, dainty eremophilas, bold callistemons and edgings of mauve nepeta (cat mint), soft silver lambs ears and clove scented dianthus and oh so many more. I have looked at each small plant and tried to give it the room it needs – an exercise in restraint that is often difficult to achieve when in a fevered condition. Careful placement should give foliage contrasts to showcase different plants and create harmony in this botanical smorgasbord.

My aim is to make a continuous garden with 'rooms' along its length, created by placing medium and tall shrubs in scallops. The interior of each scallop is planted as a separate little garden, which it should be a delight to come upon. Of course this is as yet invisible to the beholder since all the plants are the same size now and just present a vista of little green blobs. The final form only exists in my mind's eye, but, in a couple of years, all will be revealed. How could I possibly miss the chance to get that project underway?

Another fever-induced activity is at the site of our future home – planting gardens around the deciduous trees and shrubs I put in this winter when I had gardener's flu. That ailment is only cured by the planting of bare rooted sticks which the sufferer is convinced are shade trees, shrubs and fruit providers. My winter rationale was that a year of tree growth is invaluable in establishing a garden and my rationale now is that, if I am up there watering the trees over the summer, I can look after the plants surrounding them. This open windy area has been modified by the windbreak we planted three years ago and now I am making circles and nooks outlined with repeat plantings of Artemisias (wormwoods), Allardi lavenders, yellow daisies, red sage and spiky dietes. The list goes on but everything on it is hardy and, once established, has low water needs and can cope with frost.

My husband, Keith, is suffering from vegie gardener's morning sickness, a condition known to those who await the first tomato, the capsicum that turns red in time and the beans that come up in neat rows. True to his condition, he rises early to plant and tend his babies, to nut out ways to outwit the slugs with wet newspaper traps and to water at ground level while it is cool. He will be a good parent to our vegies and we will eat meals of tasty tomatoes, pumpkins, beans, beetroot, capsicums, eggplant, lettuces and lots more – delicious and a credit to his care.

The spring tidying up bug has resulted in me undertaking a course of watering deeply and adding manure and mulch to the edges of established gardens, planting a fresh petticoat of smaller shrubs and ground covers as gaps suggest. Then there are those therapeutic slash back and rejuvenate sessions that I leave until after the frosts. So satisfying!

Many people have commented on the inevitability of their own cases of Spring fever, shrugging off winter plant losses and eagerly throwing themselves into orgies of planting. Like hay fever, this is an annual condition, but unlike hay fever, the side effects are all good.

The only prescription recommended is to keep some maxims for summer in mind. These are: to create a depression around a plant when you put it in, to place plants with the same water needs together, to favour plants with low water needs, to water deeply less often and in the cool of the day, to only water when needed, to cover the soil with mulch or plants so that there is less evaporation and the surface doesn't bake to a hard crust and to conserve and re-use water wherever possible.

A bout of gardening spring fever sets you up for a year of delight and is nothing to be sneezed at. Embrace it and spread it around. This is one set of psychological and physical symptoms that we can all enjoy.

Happy gardening.

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