

**GardenAtoZ.com** presents:

## *What's Up:* This week's garden news

Janet Macunovich and Steven Nikkila help you grow  
Issue #178, April 25, 2012



### What's Up right now on GardenAtoZ.com

If you're just getting out to work in your yard you may be overwhelmed: Everything from weeds to flowers and wildlife are way ahead of schedule. No worries! We can still enjoy the color and our time outdoors because we have each other to consult on the sticky issues.

<http://www.gardenatoz.com/what%27s-up!/ensemble-weekly-editions/the-latest!/>

#### **Did we disappear from your email?**

We are having email distribution problems; thanks for letting us know! While we correct our GardenAtoZ outgoing mail, we are coming to you once again from JMaxGarden@aol.com

#### **Who are Janet & Steven?**

Entertaining answers at GardenAtoZ.com in *About Us*

#### **Support this effort**

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This link + this pdf file  
cover **two** issues you  
may have missed:

**What's Up 177 and 178.**

We're sorry if you missed either  
issue; we are working to correct  
our email distribution problems.



*There is so much that needs doing, all at once in spring! It's so good to have gardening friends to talk to, laugh with and stay on top.*

**Topics and page numbers.** (Because we are making program changes this week on GardenAtoZ.com, issue #178 has not yet been posted there. Consult this pdf for these topics, which will be posted soon on the website.)

Peony move Pages 2-3  
No skimping on fertilizer Page. 4  
Applying fertilizer Page 5  
No-grow yews Page 5  
Replace soil in pots Page 6  
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## What's coming up this week Stories from the most-asked topics.

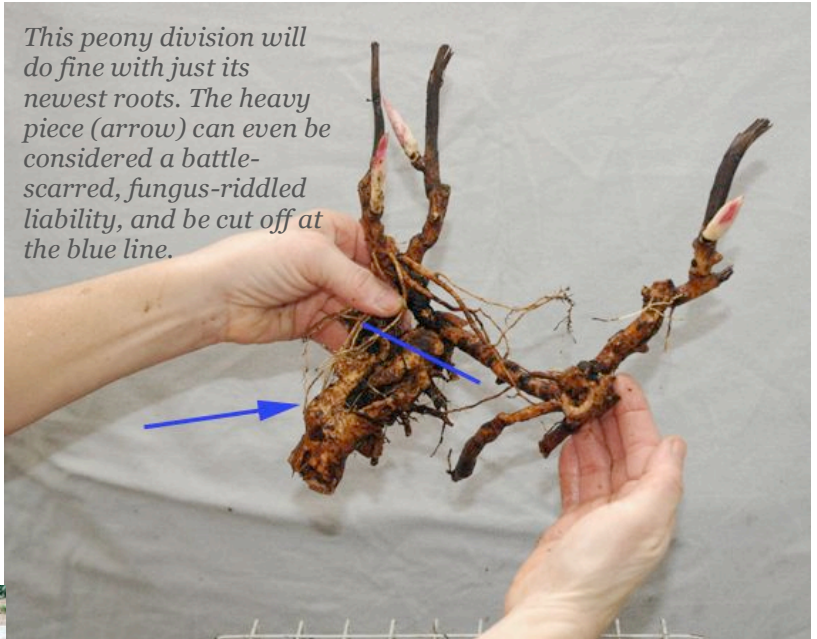
### Move made, peony forgives the broken roots

While I was cleaning up my yard I saw there were daffodils coming up right in the middle of a peony. I probably moved the peony on top of them last fall when I didn't know they were there. So I dug up the peony, moved the daffodils and put the peony back. The roots of the peony were pretty brittle and I broke some. Will the peony be all right? - C.N.

Yup, **it'll be fine**. Peony roots are more brittle in spring than in fall, which is one reason the common advice is to move them in fall rather than spring. However, you can move them when you need to. As long as they take a decent amount of root with them, they do fine.

(As a new reader you didn't know we'd given a *Green Thumbs Up* go ahead to this move, back in Ensemble Weekly Edition *What's Coming Up* 93, page 10, and also encouraged spring bulb moves in *What's Coming Up* 90, page 6.)

*This peony division will do fine with just its newest roots. The heavy piece (arrow) can even be considered a battle-scarred, fungus-riddled liability, and be cut off at the blue line.*



Stems of a recently moved peony may have a greater tendency than normal to fall over when the blossoms open. That's because the plant's base has been reduced. So you **might want to stake the plant**. Or cut the flowers as they open and enjoy them in a vase.

Can't really blame a peony for lodging. Breeders have selected for such huge flowers that even a super plant would have trouble holding them up once they begin to bob around in a breeze, or sag when wet by rain.

*When you lift a peony it's not necessary to preserve every root, as we did at left for this peony. However, you should recognize how wide the roots are and that stems have stability based on that width. So when a peony first blooms in a new place, its stems may be more likely to lodge -- to fall after the flowers open.*





**By the way, it's okay for bulbs and peonies to mix it up, even one on top of another.** In a "normal" year the bulbs would come up first, bloom, and then be grown over by the emerging peony. It's a sharing of space we call "doubling up."

You can also sow annuals among bulbs as a double-up, or allow self-sowing annuals to volunteer there. Just remember to thin the seedlings. (More in *What's Coming Up* 142, page 13.)



*Above: One month later. We'll thin again, now.*



*Above, a bulb-Sedum double-up: Indian quamash (Camassia 'Blue Danube') is occupying the air space in May but will be bloomed out and cut back before the tall sedum really needs that room.*

*Left: Bulb-Annual double-up. We left an area mulch-thin last fall, so love-in-a-mist (Nigella damascena) seedlings would germinate among daffodils (daffs not shown).*

*Left, top: About six weeks ago we pulled the winter weeds -- undesirables such as tall rocket and creeping speedwell that germinate in fall and winter. We also removed some of the Nigella to leave room for the rest to grow to good size.*



## Afraid of overdoing the fertilizer

I bought slow release organic fertilizer (Fertrell Holly Care) for my flower bed because you said it was good for the soil as well as the plants. I put on 10 pounds because you said the beds I told you about needed that. But it seems so thick. I'm afraid I overdid it. – J.R. –

Fertrell Holly Care's label tells you its ingredients/analysis make it a 4-6-4 fertilizer -- 4% nitrogen, 6% phosphorus, 4% potassium formula. Since 4% times ten pounds is 0.4, that ten pounds of fertilizer you used contains 0.4 pounds of nitrogen.

Ten pounds -- 0.4 pounds of nitrogen -- is *less* than the annual need for mixed perennial-annual-shrub beds. The rate of nitrogen use in such beds is 0.2 - 0.3 pounds per 100 square feet per year. You told us **the beds cover 250 square feet**, which means they need 2-1/2 times that amount.

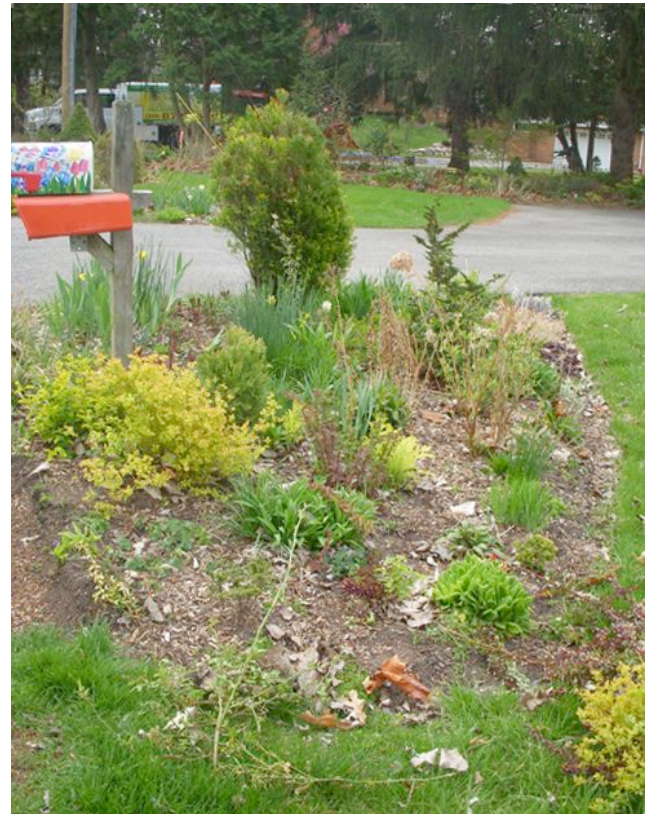
**So spread that ten pounds of fertilizer** as evenly as you can. If any remains when you reach the end of the beds, go back and scatter more. Don't short those flowers.

In fall as the season ends you can apply another 5-10 pounds -- the rest of the beds' annual need.

One of the beauties of slow release organic fertilizer is that it's unlikely to burn the plants, even if it piles up a bit unevenly. Before such products become soluble and can enter plant roots, they must be acted upon by fungi and bacteria in the soil. In layers both thick or thin, those microorganisms will release the goods a bit at a time.

(More about fertilizer's effects in the Spring tab of the Ensemble Weekly Editions department, in *What's Coming Up* 93 page 8.)

***This bed***, shown before and after its spring spa (cut down and prune, cut a new edge, weed, and divide) covers about 125 square feet. It **deserves about five pounds of a fertilizer with 4% or 5% nitrogen** in spring, five more in fall.



## When fertilizer needs tucking in

Do I have to move the leaves and mulch out of the way before I spread fertilizer? - B.A. -

I am a great believer in doing a job when I want to do it, and to hell with the consequences.

- Christopher Lloyd -

If you're using a **salt-based, processed fertilizer** you should **place it in direct contact with moist soil**. Only then will that material dissolve to become available to plants' roots.

**Slow release organic products** like manure, feather meal and blood meal **can go on or under mulch**. They must decompose to enter the roots, a transformation that may happen most quickly in soil but can take place even on top of a mulch.

Ideally: Spread fertilizer and then top it with mulch. If existing mulch is thinner than an inch, spread the fertilizer on it and cover it with new mulch. (Mulches: *What's Coming Up* 89, page 2.)

So you can leave leaves and old bark, top dress with organic fertilizer and know the mix will return to the Earth, fortified. (More in *What's Coming Up* 90, page 5.)

## Aiming for answers: Hit or Miss

"What happened next" from previous articles. We celebrate the hits, update the misses.

Missed that mark:

Yews continue to sit and wait after close cut

Some yews I cut back last year didn't sprout, or not much. I've decided not to wait for them and to *not* replace them, as the house looks fine without all that bulk. And I won't miss the constant pruning!

Just thought I'd let you know that the yew cut-back didn't work. -S.B. -

If a bush is too big,  
don't ask "should I?"

Go ahead and cut.

If it lives, great.

If it dies, replace it  
with something  
better suited!

-Janet -

**We are also still waiting** for sprouts from some of last year's stubbed yews. It happens sometimes; **maybe we'll never know "why."** Perhaps in this case some shrubs' normal urge to push out new growth was quelled by last spring's cold, wet weather. On occasion in this circumstance we've taken your approach and elected continued shrublessness. (A guide to a bush-free foundation design is in Ensemble Weekly editions, *What's Coming Up* 93.)

(Why and how to of cutting back hard in Ensemble Weekly Edition *What's Coming Up* 90, pages 8 & 9. Reasons some shrubs might not bounce back in *What's Coming Up* 92, page 3.)

When your garden is finished, I hope it will be more beautiful than you anticipated, require less care than you had expected, and have cost only a little more than you had planned. -Thomas Church -

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## Tip cuttings: Of special interest on the Forum

### Giving containers a fresh start

Should I empty my big pots and put in new soilless mix? I did like how the plants grew in the mix last year. – V.B. –

**We dump soilless mix every year or two**, using it as mulch in the garden. If we keep it too long, the bark particles can break down too fine so the medium becomes a less airy root space.

**Aim to make watering less of a chore** when you renew big pots. Two possibilities: Add polymers to the new mix. (More about this under the Spring tab in Ensemble Weekly Editions; see *What's Coming Up* 144, page 12.) Or wick the container so you can set them up to self-water whenever you're absent. (See *What's Coming Up* 93, page 5.)



*Above: We just emptied and refilled these colorful pvc containers we created for a garden at the Detroit Zoo.*

Colorful container planting ideas in *What's Coming Up* 41, page 8.

### Runners had a great winter

I am thrilled and amazed at how far my fairy candle (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) spread since last fall! And every one of several Solomon's seal species (*Polygonatum*) in my gardens seems to have doubled its coverage. – S.L. –



Big chunks of Great Lakes terrain were frost-free all winter, so roots just kept on growing. Plants that increase via underground rhizomes claimed lots of new territory.

*Above: For a real scare, look what rampant runners did with extra growing time during a mild winter. In a naturalized bed, where there were stray shoots of gooseneck loosestrife (Lysimachia clethroides) in fall there is now a dense, broad mass.*



Worst, the gooseneck is mixing it up with other runners\*, including Canada thistle, queen of the prairie, bellflower, and horsetail. Of course we let it naturalize -- who could tackle digging and sorting out that tangle?!

Unfortunately, lawn grass is a creeper that also fared well during this mild winter. It led us a merry chase along some bed edges this spring, especially where we didn't cut a new edge last fall. Those grass roots ran almost 24 inches into the bed, infiltrating front edge perennials. We lifted those perennials as we cut a new edge, flipped them over to follow and remove the grass, then set them back in place.

We always hope for silver linings. In this case, it's that colonies of beneficial fungi and bacteria in the soil grew like gangbusters during winter, too. (More about mycorrhizae in *What's Coming Up* 92, page 5.)

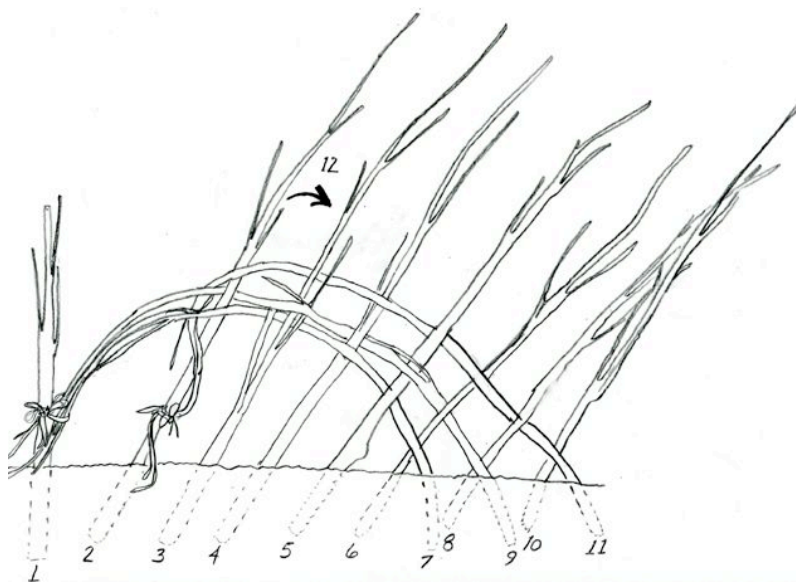
We can also revel in discovering unusual words related to runners, such as ramet and ortet. (See *What's Coming Up* 91, page 9.)

\*Get a feel for the potential of all those rascals in the website version of this issue. Also get to know other runners, butterbur (*Petasites*) in *What's Coming Up* 90, page 4 and chameleon plant (*Houttuynia*) in *What's Coming Up* 143, page 5.

*Right: The white runner (right side arrow) is bishop's weed (Aegopodium podagraria) making a break from where it lodged within a daylily clump. If we simply pull what we see on the surface (left arrows, pointing to the three-part bishop's weed leaves) we'd miss that runner that's still below ground. So when we see running-root weeds in spring, we loosen the whole area, lift compromised perennials, trace and remove roots from below.*



Another approach to edging beds applies when we try to keep feet out of gardens. At our Detroit Zoo Adopt-a-Garden we construct wattle fence along bed edges most likely to be invaded by feet. We've posted an article about this edging on GardenAtoZ.com which includes step by step illustrations. If you want to weave wattle fences as we do, check that pattern at Wattle We Do at the Zoo.



<http://www.gardenatoz.com/what%27s-up!/what%27s-coming-up-this-week/wattle-we-do-at-the-zoo/>

Your fences need to be horse-high, pig-tight and bull-strong.

- Old Farmer's Advice from Chubb Harper -

## Wimpy wisteria and shrimpy grape hyacinth

My *Wisteria* bloomed but the flowers are wimpy. I have grape hyacinth flowers sitting on the soil surface -- no stem, just a flower at ground level. What gives? - D. -

Some species, *Wisteria* among them, **need warmth to develop good flower color and size**. It's possible we'll see washed out daylily flowers this year, too.

Other flowers, hardy bulbs chief among them, need a full winter of cold to develop roots and stem. Deny them winter's cold or bring them on too fast, too soon, and things like this can happen. **It's not a permanent change**. Next year's blooms can be normal.

(*Wisteria* might disappoint for other reasons. Check it out in Ensemble Weekly Edition, *What's Coming Up* 92, page 11. As for pruning this vine, see *What's Coming Up* 91, page 5.)

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## What's going on in Janet & Steven's gardens

### Saluting the admirals

We have never seen **so many red admiral butterflies** as we're seeing this spring.



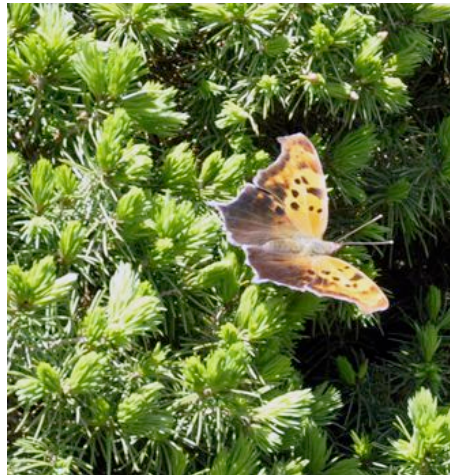
*Left: There were close to 50 red admiral butterflies on this crabapple, 25 on a Burkwood viburnum.*

How come so many? Usually in zone 5, adult red admirals as well as pupae in development die during the winter freeze. The next red admirals we normally see are those that migrate north from places with milder winters. This year, they pulled through and are starting out right here.

They are interesting butterflies. We bet you'll see them once you know

to look for them, and learn to recognize them by their motion alone. They dart about with an energy quite different from the flit and float crew of high summer -- monarchs and black swallowtails.

*It's a thrill to see so many large butterflies so early. This year, red admirals (above) mix it up with question marks (near right) and mourning cloaks (far right).*



## In Janet & Steven's gardens

**Worrying about trees' leaves...** ...and the shrubs' foliage. And the perennials' shoots.

All these plants started into growth in a rush weeks ago, but stalled when spring's normal cold returned. A leaf **half-grown and** minus the tough cuticle that comes with maturity is a leaf **wide open to fungal attack**. Some of the precocious growth has been nipped by frost, torn by hail, or shredded by wind. Damaged, it's even more susceptible to infection.



When foliage develops quickly, without delay, the period during which it can be infected is short. This year, **fungus has had many weeks to find footholds**. We've seen rose leaves with black spot already, for crying out loud. (We're plucking off those leaves, and pruning hard to let air flow freely over the strong new shoots we leave in place.)

So, not that we can do much about it, but we fear it'll be a bad fungus year. Scab, blotch, spot, canker.... (More about weather's ripple effects in the Spring tab of the Ensemble Weekly Editions department. For frost consequences: *What's Coming Up* 93, page 8. For wind, *What's Up* 92, page 1.)

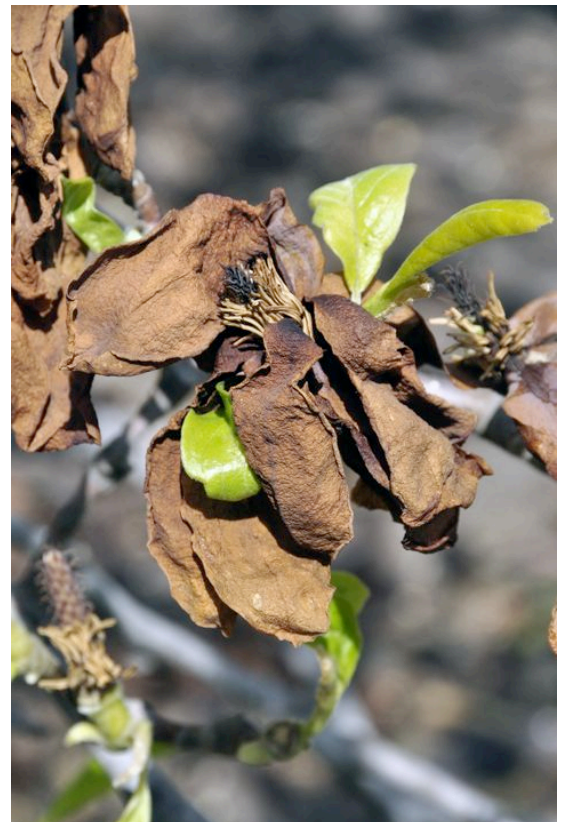
Some people have told us they had fungicide sprayed on their Norway maples to try to break the tar spot cycle that's been disfiguring maple leaves for the last 8 years. Unfortunately, they may not see much return for that investment. Even if it did reduce the likelihood of infection for a little while, its effect won't last through such a long leafing-out period.

However, those maples might benefit to some degree, and if so they may be less spotty than others at summer's end.

We're **thinning and pruning to help plants beat fungus**. (As a for-instance, tall *Phlox*, in *What's Coming Up* 142, page 4). As we prune spring flowering shrubs and trees, post-bloom, we're also helping in this regard since fungus-discouraging air will flow more freely.



*Magnolias bloomed beautifully this year. The show came early, but lasted for a relatively long time.*



*Frost ended the performance abruptly and a return to normal spring temperatures put leaf growth into a cold-induced stall that's lasted a month. The process of petal shed was derailed, so lots of ugly brown remained on the tree, masking the green. We hear great concern when people ask, "Will the tree be okay?" No worries, the branches are alive and the leaves will prevail. Keep the tree's root zone moist and if the foliage is as pale as you see at right, apply a liquid acid-loving plant fertilizer.*



## In Janet & Steven's gardens

### Continuing to prune: Current target, spring bloomers

We're now making those cuts we'd normally make in late May as spring bloomers finish. This past week, we cut **forsythias** to the ground. They'll be five feet tall and loaded with flower buds by summer's end. **Redbuds** and crabapples are our next targets. (Keeping in mind that it's convention, not absolute necessity, that defines this pruning season. See a weeping redbud being pruned *before* bloom: *What's Coming Up* 143, page 2.)

We also cut old wood from **elderberries**, and relieved some **lilacs** of dead and weak wood to reduce borer damage. That thinning also admits light that can stimulate new growth from 'way down -- basal replacement shoots these shrubs need.



*Above, right: See this lilac pruned episode in the GardenAtoZ.com Forum at <http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/192-rejuvenation-pruning-for-an-old-lilac/>*

### More items related to spring pruning:

There is also a very similar borer problem that strikes *Viburnum*, illustrated in:

Ensemble Weekly Edition *What's Coming Up* 92, page 7.

How to prune a crabapple and weeping cherry *right now*, with illustrations, at our Forum:

[forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/195-time-to-keep-weeper-small-control-a-crab/](http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/195-time-to-keep-weeper-small-control-a-crab/)

Cutting *Clematis*: *What's Coming Up* 91, page 12

Ornamental grass, tie it up before cutting it down:

*What's Coming Up* 142, page 4

Two-tone crabapples and weeping cherries gone upright: *What's Coming Up* 91, page 13

## Bringing flowers indoors

Are your **lilacs not as fragrant as you recall** from past years? Blooming weeks ahead of schedule but no longer blessed with the warmth that coaxed them out, their scent may fall short. Fragrance is a chemical affair based on formulae that require certain temperatures. Cut lilacs in bud, bring them in and keep them in strong light. Their scent may improve.

*When you cut lilacs for a vase, peel the cut end of the branch and remove the leaves from that stem. When water flow is restricted, as it is when the only point of entry is the clipped branch, leaves intercept and commandeer most of the water, and flowers droop. Remove the leaves and the blooms benefit.*





## In Janet & Steven's gardens

### Liberating indoor plants

Our back porch is beginning to green up with plants moving out for the summer. They'll acclimate to sun and wind there under the porch roof.



*We've finally released this **jade** branch from captivity. It proved our point, **surviving three months of cold, dark storage**. It's dropped about 2/3 of its foliage but is otherwise fine and had even counted down to spring and resumed growing while still in the bag.*

*In honor of its service we decided the jade wouldn't go to the compost but into a pot to root and grow on. It's on the back porch now, hardening off to sun and wind.*

### Fending off wasteful herbicide applications

Many gardeners are just starting to tend beds -- May 1 being their normal "start work" date. As they do, they are realizing how far advanced plant growth is, including weed growth.

If you're despairing over a weedy bed, take comfort, you have plenty of company. However, don't break out the pre-emergent weedkiller. The likes of Preen® won't kill what's already grown beyond its first leaf, yet its residual can have effects you didn't expect. See Ensemble Weekly Edition *What's Coming Up* 91, page 4, *What's Coming Up* 41, page 13 and pages 3-6, and in the Forum, topic <http://forum.gardenatoz.com/index.php?/topic/181-is-preen-worthwhile/>.

### So many things to do, so little time!

What a tough time of year to have been cut off posting the news for three weeks in our What's Up news section of GardenAtoZ.com! Thank goodness for an unaffected Forum, and for program changes underway to let us resume normal posting on May 1.

More spring-rush topics, accessible in Ensemble Weekly Editions:

**Design:** For privacy, without fortress-like walls and hedges. *What's Coming Up* 142, page 16

**Insect pests:**

Pine sawfly: *What's Coming Up* 142, page 12

Predicting insects by plant development, not calendar date: *What's Coming Up* 91, page 6

**Messy trees:**

Seedless trees: *What's Coming Up* 144, page 7

Stopping the fruit on a ginkgo or other tree: *What's Coming Up* 91, page 7

**Planting:** Bare root plants: *What's Coming Up* 90, page 4

**Miscellany:**

Daffy, variable bulb color: *What's Coming Up* 90, page 1

Water, as a spur for spring growth: *What's Coming Up* 90, page 2

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