



Homes & Gardens

Town Tribune Weekly Guide To Fall Living

Attention, Impatient Gardeners: These 10 Easy Plants Will Fill Your Garden Fast



As invigorating as spring's arrival can feel for many gardeners, it often comes with a bit of a reality check: Most gardens still look sparse, especially in April. The good news is that there are several early growers, cool-season crops, and fast-establishing flowers you can plant now that will have your garden feeling full and vibrant in no time.

Pansies:
Pansies are go-to cool-season flowers for a reason. These fast-growing, colorful plants prefer mild temperatures and can even handle the occasional light frost.

They can be started from seed, but it's more common to buy them as nursery starts since they are readily available in garden centers everywhere.

Choose plants filled with buds (but avoid those with many open blooms) for the best color display in your spring garden. Regular deadheading will keep these flowers blooming until the summer heat sets in.

Zinnias:
Zinnias are classic summer flowers, but in the right conditions, they can also grow well in the spring. They are a great option for adding some quick color to your garden, since they can go from seed to flower in as little as eight weeks. However, they are not frost-tolerant and sensitive to cold temperatures, requiring soil temperatures of at least 60°F to germinate.

That means starting zinnias in April is best for gardeners in

warmer climates where the threat of frost has already passed, especially since they grow best when direct-sown rather than started in nursery pots and then transferred.

Sunflowers:
Sunflowers are another heat-loving summer flower that can be started outdoors in April in warm climates. Like zinnias, sunflowers grow best when direct-sown, but can also be started indoors for gardeners still waiting for their last frost date to pass.

Varieties like Cherry Rose, Gypsy Charmer, and the ProCut series are all known for being fast-growing, going from seed to bloom in as little as 40 to 50 days.

Marigolds:
Marigolds are a common sight in many gardens thanks to their ecological benefits (pest control, attracting pollinators, etc.), but they are also quick growers that can help fill garden beds fast.

In warm regions, seeds can be sown outdoors in April once the last frost has passed, and in cooler areas, seeds should be started indoors for best results.

Marigolds germinate quickly (within four to seven days), and flowers normally appear 50 to 80 days after planting.

Phlox:
Phlox is a great way to fill out an early spring garden, especially for gardeners in cooler regions. Many varieties prefer cool temperatures and can withstand the season's final light frosts.

Phlox 'Spring Splash,' a woodland phlox variety, is especially well-known for its early-spring blooms in shades ranging from pink to lilac, says Marion Meesenburg, Marketing Specialist at Darwin Perennials.

Phlox is most commonly purchased as nursery starts, but you can also divide mature plants and relocate the divisions in early

spring.

Yarrow:
Yarrow adds instant texture and charm to the garden with its lacy foliage and delicate blooms. Its blooms peak in summer, but when planted in early spring, its foliage can help gardens feel more lush.

"It can be planted in April from divisions or small plants and will settle in readily, even in poorer soils," Elizabeth Waddington, a garden designer and writer with First Tunnels, says. "Yarrow is a wonderful support plant for fruit trees. Its deep roots improve soil health and bring nutrients up from deeper soil levels."

Comfrey:
As an eco-friendly and sustainable landscape designer, Waddington says that comfrey is one of her go-to plants for the garden, and that crowns do best when planted in April.

"Bocking 14 comfrey is one of the most useful and fastest-growing perennials you can add to a garden in April, quickly forming a dense clump of large, lush leaves that help beds feel full in a matter of weeks," she says.

Not only does comfrey's size add interest to the garden, but it is also beneficial to the surrounding environment because it attracts pollinators and enriches the soil.

Wild Strawberry:
Wild strawberry is best planted once the risk of frost has passed, making April (especially late April) an ideal time for many gardeners across the country.

"They can be planted in April from small plants or runners and will establish readily in both sun and partial shade, making them ideal for tucking in around larger perennials or beneath shrubs," Waddington says.

Her advice? Harvest regularly for continued fruiting and plant production.

Lettuce:
Lettuce is a staple in the cool-season vegetable garden, and for good reason. It's quick to harvest, thrives in mild weather, and can quickly fill a sparse garden with its lush foliage and range of colors.

If you're eager to get a head start on your vegetable garden, lettuce is a great option, and many varieties do well when planted in April, regardless of your growing zone.

Radishes:
Another vegetable worth considering in April is the radish. Radishes are excellent in the cool-season garden and mature quickly, going from seed to harvest in as little as 30 days.

Their foliage can help fill out a sparse garden, and their fast growth means you'll be enjoying fresh radishes in your spring salad before Memorial Day weekend.

Is Charcoal Ash Good for Your Garden? A Gardener Shares How to Use It Right

Charcoal ash can be recycled in gardens to help balance pH levels and add nutrients, but its safety and effectiveness depend on the type of charcoal used. Lump charcoal, made from pure wood, is generally safe for gardens, whereas ash from briquettes, which contain chemicals like borax and coal dust, should be avoided. Understanding these differences will empower you to use charcoal ash wisely and effectively.

Can You Add Charcoal Ash to a Garden?
Not all charcoal is created equal and whether or not you can use charcoal ash in your garden will depend on the type of charcoal you're grilling with.

Lump charcoal is an all-natural product that's made from wood and doesn't contain toxic additives. Because it's made from pure wood, lump charcoal and its ashes are technically safe for garden use.

"Charcoal is a known carcinogen and I would not recommend it for edible plants," says horticulturalist Robert Westerfield.

Charcoal briquettes are made from compressed sawdust and fillers, like borax and coal dust, and these ashes should be thrown in the trash once it's cooled.

"Charcoal briquettes contain petroleum, tar, and other binders that are unsafe to use around vegetables," Westerfield says.

He also warns that the additive could raise pH levels higher than is suitable for plants.

How Charcoal Ash Benefits Gardens:
While ash from charcoal briquettes isn't safe for plants, ash from lump charcoal can provide many of the same benefits to gardens as standard wood ash does, such as:

- Adjusting soil pH. Wood and lump charcoal ash has a relatively high pH and can be used much like garden lime to "sweeten" or raise the pH of acidic soils.
- Adding soil nutrients. Ash from wood and lump charcoal also contains macro- and micro-nutrients that plants need. Ashes can be a particularly good source of calcium and potassium, but they can also provide phosphorous, copper, boron, and other micronutrients to plants.
- Balancing compost. Ash can also be used to balance out the pH of overly acidic compost and enhance compost with extra nutrients.

Why Charcoal Ash Can Be Bad for Plants:
Although lump charcoal ash can benefit gardens in certain ways, it can also potentially harm plants if you use the wrong type of ash or apply too much of it. If you do decide to use ash in your garden, here are some potential pitfalls to be aware of.

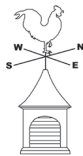
- Some ash contains contaminants. Ash from charcoal briquettes often contains chemical additives that aren't safe for food gardens and can linger in soils long after application. Even if you do use ash from lump charcoal in your garden, it's important to purchase your charcoal from reliable suppliers that don't use wood that's been treated with paints, stains, or other chemicals and to not use lump charcoal that has come in contact with lighter fluid.
- It may make soils too alkaline. Charcoal ash is alkaline and applying too much of it can raise soil pH too high and make it hard for plants to grow. To avoid this, test your soil before applying ash of any sort and always apply ash in moderation.
- It can harm acid-loving plants. Acid-loving plants, like blueberries, azaleas, and rhododendrons, grow best in acidic soils. Applying ash near these plants can raise the pH and lead to nutrient deficiencies and other issues.
- It may interfere with soil microbes. Apply large quantities of ash to soils can also imbalance soil conditions and lead to a die-off of beneficial microbes.
- It may contain excess salts. Charcoal ash may contain high quantities of salt that can make soils too salty if you apply excess ash. This is particularly problematic if you're growing plants that have a low tolerance for salt.

3 Uses for Charcoal Ash Around the House:
After burning charcoal, you can sometimes salvage leftover charcoal lumps from the ash and use them for future fires. Then, use the cooled ash in your garden or around your home using these tips—and remember to wear gloves and goggles when working with ash as it can be caustic.

- Make a DIY glass or metal cleaner. Mix lump charcoal ash with water until it forms a mildly abrasive paste, and use this paste and a cotton cloth to clean metal and glass items or buff out water rings on wooden furniture. Always test the paste in an inconspicuous spot before you start.
- Repel slugs and snails. Slugs and snails tend to avoid charcoal ash, which you can use to your advantage by encircling vulnerable plants with an unbroken line of lump charcoal ash.
- Combat slippery ice. Lump charcoal ash isn't an effective de-icer, but it can be sprinkled on icy spots in winter to provide a bit more traction.



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