

Rose gardener names her favorites

By MARGE ALPERN

The excitement of spring for the northern gardener begins with sighting the first robin and the first blooming crocus.

Certainly the crocus, which so closely resembles the color and shape of the Easter egg, deserves to be the most popular of the early bulbs, but the lesser known winter aconite or ranunculus is being discovered by many gardeners.

Ranunculus may bloom even before the crocus. It is a little yellow buttercup-like flower posed above a fine green, frilly collar. Unlike the crocus, this brave bloomer never seems to mind the late winter conditions it frequently has to endure and will hold its flowers through all.

At its best when naturalized in large masses in open woods, ranunculus seeds itself freely and soon forms colonies.

THE ERANTHIS TUBERS must be planted in early fall, preferably late August or early September, and are available through many of the fall seed catalogs. Like lily bulbs, eranthis can't be left out of the soil for very long or it will dry out and not survive to the following spring. This is the reason for the less than 100 percent success frequently reported. Plant the tubers firmly about two inches deep in shade or half shade, about eighteen bulbs to a square foot for a charming solid effect.

Unlike crocus and most spring blooming bulbs, eranthis does not have

a blade-like leaf that gets dry and straggly as it ages. The charming, almost Elizabethan, collar of leaves continues to grow and actually becomes quite large, forming an attractive ground cover that remains green and tidy for some time after the flower has fallen.

As the eranthis fades, the blue scilla, hyacinth, daffodils, grape hyacinth and all the tulips poke their determined green tops above the mulch and soil. Be sure you aren't making life more difficult for them by keeping them covered too long.

It isn't necessary to wait until frost and freezing temperatures are completely past. It is especially important to uncover the early blooming bulbs because they will prematurely begin to grow under the heavy mulch. The stems will twist and turn as they try to work their way through. So gently use your fingers and reach in to remove the leaves and other mulch.

ROSES AND PERENNIALS may also sprout too soon if kept under the warm mulch which encourages growth. If uncovered, the plants will remain dormant until they are naturally ready to sprout. More roses are said to be lost in our region from winter protection left on too long than from that taken off too early.

Because last winter was so mild, losses among roses are considerably less than in prior years, and you probably will be buying fewer replacements

than usual. But since the All-American Rose selections for 1980 are reported to do exceptionally well in our area, it will be hard to resist purchasing the new ones with their romantic names of Love, Cherish, and Honor.

Like most rose gardeners, I have my favorites and would like to recommend a few special old timers. Spartan (red-orange), Chrysler Imperial (red), Tropicana (red-orange), King's Ransom (yellow), and the simple single Betty Prior (pink) are among my choices of roses.

My purchase for this year will be Aloha, a rose I have admired for many years in the garden of my friend, Louise Serafini of Troy. Louise is one of the finest gardeners in our area. Everything grows, thrives, blooms and glows under her devoted and knowledgeable care, and if she recommends it, I'll try it.

As the long-awaited spring arrives and we think about nourishing the dormant plants, bear in mind that roses are heavy feeders and are known to benefit from organic feeding. Banana peel, high in potassium, has long been used as a fertilizer, and fish heads or seafood shells also can be dug down deep into the surrounding soil.

THERE IS VERY little organic material that cannot be recycled to advantage. Old orchid bark, collected during transplanting, can be re-used in the bottom of large flower pots. It's cheaper than soil and will deteriorate during the summer into fine growing media.

If you are growing sprouts for your salads, save the water you run through the seeds and feed it to your house plants. Left over tea and the water drained from cooked vegetables also can be collected and diluted for a healthy fertilizer for house plants.

For those of you who are really serious about growing organically, it's time now to start collecting the good garbage. Vegetable and fruit waste, egg shells, tea bags, and coffee grounds can be dug into the compost to enrich it. If you carefully exclude any animal fat, you will have no unwelcome four legged visitors.

Erantius (Winter Aconite) is generally available locally in the fall or earlier through many catalogs: John Scheepers, Inc., 63 Wall St., New York, N.Y., 10005, \$4 for 25 (Erantius cilicica — a new hybrid); and Burpees Seed Co., Warminster, Pa., 18991, \$2.99 for 24 (Erantius byemalis — special price through June 30).

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