



Murder most foul

There may be life after death for plants that look to have perished, says Sir Roddy

PLEASE DON'T be in a rush to dig up plants that look dead because they may not be. After the cold winter many are reluctant to start growing. Indeed, in some cases you may have to wait as long as June before some shrubs will start showing signs of life. Some herbaceous perennials may easily take some time to start growing as well. Many plants have had a rough time: in early March some were about two months behind.

A way to see if a shrub or recently planted tree is still alive is to gently scrape the bark with a coin and if you see green underneath it means it is still alive. You may have to start at the top of the plant and slowly work your way downwards as the higher shoots may have been killed off while the lower ones may still be alive. Many evergreens are covered in dead-looking leaves that have been burned by the cold. Leave these alone to shed their damaged foliage in their own time, only to replace them with fresh. Once they have produced their new leaves give them a good liquid feed to congratulate them on their bravery.

Surprisingly, my dahlias came though the winter outdoors, but then they were growing in a sheltered border by a house wall where the ground never becomes too wet. Those growing in damper ground may have rotted and gone to the Heavenly Nursery.

Annual bedding plants can safely be planted towards the middle of May in the south and early June up north to avoid any possible frost damage. There's no rush; it's better to wait for a dry spell. The advent of the 'plug plant' has made life so much easier for those who do not raise their own plants from seed. However, it can be difficult to find young plants of the taller-growing, wonderfully scented, white-flowering tobacco and so it is worth growing them from seeds (as well as the white annual cosmos). Any average soil will entertain most bedding plants without having to feed them as a matter of course although I do give mine a dose of tomato or rose feed when the buds start to show colour. Have a watering can handy in case of hot and dry weather, as well as a pair of scissors for dead-



Dahlias.

heading to prolong flowering time. Busy Lizzie comes in very useful for shaded areas of the garden that need an extra splash of summer colour.

I can no longer bring myself to throw away plants if I know them to be still alive. Horticultural murder is not my line. I am thinking particularly of spring bulbs that are growing in the wrong place. I have just created a new border for more vegetables and have had to dig around a healthy clump of daffodils. The art is to leave them until they have finished flowering then dig them up and plant them in a sunny spot at the same depth until the leaves have died down completely. They are then dug up and stored in a cool and dry place and you will be rewarded with healthy bulbs for planting out in the autumn. This is a technique used by owners of very small gardens in which spring



bulbs need to give way for summer annuals.

If you have bulbs growing in the lawn you should wait for six weeks after they have finished flowering before you can safely mow over them. Never tie daffodil foliage in a knot. Yes, the dying foliage is ugly. However, if you mix with daffodils with, say, hostas, the emerging foliage of the latter will soon hide from site the dead leaves of the former.

May is a busy month. Evergreens should be planted without delay but if it is dry give them a good soaking on their foliage as well. Suckers will soon appear from the base of grafted roses. Do not under any circumstances cut them. Excavate down and gently tear them off at source. Protect strawberry flowers if threatened by frost. Now that deep-rooted weeds are growing hard and fast it is time to spray them with a systemic, glyphosate-based product (which becomes inter when it contacts the soil). There is a delicious climbing French bean called 'Blue Lake' which you must try. Tolerant of prolonged dry spells, this stringless bean has rounded pods that make excellent additions, raw, to a summer salad, and they freeze well. I can thoroughly recommend 'Blue Lake' as a superior alternative to the flat-podded runner bean varieties as even the older pods do not become stringy. ■