

March Brings the Start of the Gardening Season

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Once the calendar page turns to March, the pulse of the avid gardeners really starts to quicken. March marks the true start of the vegetable gardening season. Days are getting longer, the sun is moving higher overhead and the ground is warming up. The start of spring is just around the corner and so is the garden planting season.

Take note that I said, “just around the corner”. As of late this week mid morning soil temperatures were still a little bit cool, still running in the mid 40s. Granted, three days of sunshine and warm south breezes can boost that soil temperature up, but three days of clouds can bring it right back down! We generally don’t recommend planting before March 15th, unless we have measured mid morning soil temperatures of 50 degrees or warmer.

While March brings the start of the gardening season, it doesn’t deliver the entire thing immediately and it is a very conditional start. First of all we have the aforementioned temperatures. Most of our planting will be the latter half of March but if we have some warm soil conditions, we can push peas and potatoes a week or so ahead of the normal March 15th (or 17th for you St. Patrick’s Day potato planting traditionalists). Just remember that we are subject to those late winter/early spring weather extremes and sometimes those early season plantings fail miserably. I like to suggest staggered plantings of some of these early crops on seven to ten day intervals. Plant a row of peas around March 15th. Then plant another row around March 23rd or so. If a later planting is up and growing good and you have little to nothing from an early planting, rip that failed row out and replant. Space is too valuable to waste!

Another consideration is soil moisture. If you tilled your garden last fall, you are probably good to go just as soon as it’s warm enough to plant as the soil surface has dried off nicely in recent days. If you need to till your garden, you may have problems though as it could still be muddy down at tillage depth. You never want to till wet or muddy soil as you will create a lot of clods that will haunt you all season long, and possibly into next year as well!

Assuming we have fairly normal weather through the month of March, then there are other crops, besides peas and potatoes to consider planting. Transplants of all the cole crops can be planted the latter half of March. This includes cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower. Other early crops to consider would be lettuce, radishes and turnips. Once we get to that last week of March you can also start planting onions, spinach and beets.

There are several very popular vegetable crops that are not on this list, most noticeably tomatoes, peppers and all the vine crops. These are warm season species that have no frost tolerance and need much warmer soils. These are usually not going to be planted outside until early May. In fact, we shouldn’t even be starting tomatoes for transplanting until the end of March!

We do have an excellent bulletin titled “Vegetable Garden Planting Guide.” This handy four page bulletin is free and has great information on how much you need to consider planting, planting depth, row spacing, common problems and a great calendar showing when to plant and when you can expect to harvest. I have posted the planting calendar page on the web. It can be accessed at: <http://gearycountyextension.com/VegCalendar.pdf>. Copies of the bulletin can be picked up at the Geary County Extension Office, 119 East 9th St, Junction City or online at K-State Research and Extension’s web site: <http://www.ksre.k-state.edu/>.