

How soon can I plant tomatoes?

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I shudder every time I walk into any store that has garden plants for sale this time of year. It's an involuntary reaction from seeing all the tomato plants that folks are buying and want to get them into the ground NOW. The problem is that even with the nice days that we've been having, it's still too early to be planting tomatoes. Even though tomatoes originated from the cool regions of the northern Andes, today's modern tomatoes are heat loving vines. They are very sensitive to cool soils and should not be planted until soil temperatures are up to 65 or 70 degrees. My preferred planting time is Mother's Day but will accept anytime after May 1. If you want to start sooner I would put down black plastic, hold the edges down with soil, about one week prior to planting to heat up the soil. Then use something like the water teepees to help protect the plants. A couple of things to consider is first of all, remove the black plastic after about mid May. Leaving it on too long can actually make the soil too hot by mid summer. IF you plop tomatoes into the ground with out protection too early, they will be shocked and can actually turn purplish due to phosphorus deficiency - the roots just don't work well in cold soil. The cold shock will also cause them to stay in vegetative mode longer. What that means is that they won't be blooming until well after later planted tomatoes. If you really want early tomatoes, plant some in good sized pots, but small enough to move, and place them in a sunny west facing location. Then if it gets cold, you can move them inside for protection. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm

Chuck Otte.

My Peonies aren't blooming because I have no ants

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. At least once a year I will get a call from someone who's peonies are no longer blooming and they are convinced it's because they don't have any ants. Well, ants don't make peonies bloom. You see ants on peony flower buds because these big buds excrete a lot of sweet plant sap and the ants are harvesting it. No flower buds, and there are no ants because there is no food! Peonies don't bloom because the crowns are too deep in the soil. Sometimes this is a mistake at planting time, and other times it's a function of soil and organic matter that has collected at the base of the plant. When you plant a peony tuber, look for the buds or eyes. These need to be 1 to 2 inches below the soil surface. If they are deeper, buds will start to form and then abort. If you planted them and they never bloomed, this fall dig them up and replant them with the eyes just one inch deep. If the plants used to bloom but they blooms have gotten fewer and smaller, and they are still getting full sun they soil and stuff is collecting on the crown. Make a note of which plants are doing this and then this fall, after you cut them back, take a garden rake and carefully rake off an inch of soil and haul it away. If next year they still don't bloom, then in the fall of 2016 dig them up and reset them. Whether they are blooming well or not give them a good fertilizing this spring, in the next few weeks and water it in well. Then leave the foliage all summer long until at least late August. There's no harm in not cutting back the foliage after a freeze, but please don't use the lawnmower. Get that old growth out of the area! This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck

Otte.

Soil color can be deceiving

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Every time I hear a gardener talk about good black soil I quietly chuckle to myself. When a gardener asks me where they can get some good black soil, I ask them to describe what they mean by good black soil. You see, while soil color is one of the descriptors that soil scientists use when discussing and classifying soils, color actually has little to do with whether a soil is good or not. When talking about soils black soils can be an indicator of highly fertile soils, but not necessarily. When you mention red soils, people start assuming you've got a nasty red Georgia or Oklahoma clay. Red soil is nothing more than an indicator of iron oxides. One of the better soils we have in this area is called the Geary silt loam. It is fairly common just west of Junction City. These soils can appear very red. I'd take this soil for my garden any day. On the other hand, I could get you a truckload of Sutphen soil that is very black. About as black a soil as you will ever see. Sutphen soils are usually classified as silty clays or silty clay loams. While it looks good it can have clods the size of Rhode Island, it can be extremely sticky when wet and be a total pain if you try to garden in it! No, color is not a good indicator of soil desirability. Most gardeners are better off to stick with the soil they've got and just start adding organic matter to it. Lots of organic matter and work it in deep. Don't try adding sand, don't pay big dollars for a truck load of "good black dirt", work with what ya got! If you are trying raised beds then there are some things we can do, but otherwise, stay with what ya got!

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