

## Time To Gear Up For Gardens

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's the first weekend of May. We've had some nice rains, the world is turning green again so it's time to get the garden planted, right? Welllll, yes and no. It is gardening season and for many homeowners and gardeners that means things like tomatoes, corn, squash and peppers. So is it time to plant all of these? In a nutshell, no.

The first challenge is getting everything dried out. Remember that much of the area had 2 to 5 inches of rain the last week of April. Then it turned cold. It's going to be a while before soils dry out enough to till! You never want to work wet soil. Some gardeners will talk about "mudding in a crop" and that is never a good idea. When soil is overly wet, and you try to till it, even just a little, it's like working with potter's clay. You compress the soil, you force the air out of it, and you create clods. Clods dry hard, like bricks. They are slow to break down, as in you'll be dealing with them all summer long.

The next issue is temperature. As we saw earlier this week the thermometer has been all over the board. Plants like tomatoes and peppers are very sensitive to cold weather. Anything under 60 and definitely under 50 are not a friend of tomatoes and peppers. Mid-week we had daytime highs that never cleared 50. If you already had some of these warm weather crops in the ground, they may be looking a little off color. It's going to take quite a while for them to snap back out of this cold weather.

I encourage gardeners to never set out tomatoes and peppers until Mother's Day weekend. By then we generally are far enough into spring that really cold weather is highly unlikely. If you've been "chomping at the bit" to get these planted, well you'd just better keep chomping for another week. Warmer weather is returning and it will really get that soil warmed up and dried out so you'll be able to get those favorite tomatoes planted.

However, if you happen to like sweet potatoes, I'd hold off until the third weekend of May. Sweet potatoes are a tropical vine. They are the most cold sensitive of almost any garden crop that we grow in Kansas. You really want to make sure the ground is well warmed up before putting these in the ground. But your planting window runs clear on into late June so don't feel like you have to get them planted in late May. Surprisingly, the last thing we often plant in the spring is our winter squash; butternut, acorn and Hubbard. You want these maturing as we head into September so don't be in a hurry with these either!

One thing that experienced gardeners will do is to have staggered plantings. Think like beans and even squash can be planted at intervals so that you spread out the harvesting. Rather than planting six rows of green beans at once, plant two this week, wait two weeks and plant another two rows, wait two more weeks and plant the final two rows. This way you can have fresh green beans over an extended period later in the summer. Then come July and August remember that you can start planting things like potatoes and other cool weather crops for a fall harvest. Just more ways to extend the gardening season.

The last thing to remember is that fertilization is critical. Most garden soil samples that come in have plenty of phosphorus but they are low on nitrogen. Apply a good balanced fertilizer pre plant and then side dress most garden crops once a month through the growing season to keep them healthy and productive! High soil pH is another common problem, but that's the topic for another week!