

Get Ready To Start Gardening, But Not Quite Yet

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The official start of spring is about two weeks away. Were a little over a week away from the traditional potato planting day. But be forewarned that this may be a good year to break from tradition and not be in a hurry to get the spring garden started. I'm not honestly sure where or how the tradition of potato planting on St. Patrick's Day got started, but I'm sure there is some connection with "Irish" potatoes. Which is really a misnomer because potatoes originated in South America. But anyway I am sure that there is someplace in this country where St. Patrick's Day is an acceptable time to plant potatoes, but it isn't always the case around here!

March is typically the start of the vegetable gardening season if the weather cooperates. Timing the planting of many crops is part calendar, part weather conditions and a whole lot soil conditions. The earliest that I would ever start planting garden crops is mid March and that would be under the best of conditions. When it's the first week of March and we've still had below zero temperatures, the ground isn't very warm. Soil temperatures are running in the low 30's right now and that is just too cold for anything!

We need to have soil temperatures of 50 degrees for several days before we start planting anything. Even then we may have problems. A couple of years ago I did plant my potatoes on March 17th. Soil temperature was up into the low 50's and things were looking good. A few days after planting the weather turned off cold and cloudy, soil temperatures dropped, things stayed cold for weeks and it took a month before my potatoes came up. I lost a good 25% of my seed potatoes to rot. So be prepared to take a few chances with your early garden.

The other thing to be aware of is that with winter being so slow to let go, garden centers and nurseries have been slower than normal getting early season transplants ready. In another week to ten days they should have nice sized cabbage plants ready to go, but don't be in a hurry to get them just yet. The earliest crop to plant would be peas followed in a few days by lettuce, broccoli, potatoes and radish. A little later in March plant beets, cabbage, cauliflower, turnips and by the very end of March, spinach and onions. But again, keep track of soil temperature before committing any seeds or transplants to the soil!

The other thing that you have to be careful of is soil moisture conditions. If you didn't till up your garden patch last fall, it's going to be a while before you can get started. The ground needs to thaw out, which may take another week, and it needs to dry out which may take more than a week. The last thing that you want to do is to try to till soil that is even a little bit too wet. With the clay content that we have in many of our soils, tilling when it's wet will just make a cloddy mess that you will be fighting all year long! If you did till your garden last fall then you can plant as soon as the soil is dry enough that you can make a row with a hoe. If the soil starts to come up in clods, instead of fine granular soil then it's still too wet!

After a long winter many of us badly want to get outside and start gardening. Cabin fever is taking over and only gardening fever will cure it. But don't be in too big of a hurry and make wasted actions. Start getting your supplies ready. Start getting your tools cleaned up and ready. Go ahead and fertilize the garden. But spend a little bit more time watching basketball or spring training baseball before you start getting things in the soil!