

## Time to Plant the Garden

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many serious gardeners have had seeds in the ground for over a month. But for a lot of people the gardening season doesn't really start until they can plant their tomatoes. More on that later, but we are just barely on the cusp of tomato planting time.

I encourage gardeners to clear off their gardens and till them in the fall so they can get a good jump on the gardening season the next spring. In March, soils are cold and often damp. They are slow to dry out enough to where we can till them without creating clods. We had been having a fairly dry April until about ten days ago. So if you didn't have your garden already tilled, make sure it is dry enough that you don't make clods!

The first of May marks the end of planting cool season crops, or at least the first round. Many of those crops we plant in March and April can be planted again in July and August including potatoes! But May Day marks the start of the warm season crop planting time. Different vegetable crops, just like different people, have preferred temperatures. Potatoes, peas, and spinach like cooler weather. Tomatoes, okra, sweet corn all prefer it warmer and sweet potatoes like it hot!

The list of crops that are best planted in May contains some of the favorite vegetables of many home gardeners. In addition to the number one favorite vegetable in home gardens, tomatoes, the May planting list includes: beans (snap and Lima), cucumbers, eggplant, melons (all kinds), peppers, okra, pumpkins, sweet corn, and summer squash. Sweet potatoes may be our tenderest crop and really need to not be planted until we get into the latter half of May. They are very tender and need warm soils and no cold weather! Winter squash (acorn, butternut, etc.) are best planted in June to push their anticipated harvest date into the fall. I normally harvest my garlic in mid to late June so then put winter squash into this space.

Some crops, like beans, can be relay planted. This means that you plant another row, or rows, every two to three weeks. This way you can have an ongoing supply of fresh beans from early July, maybe even late June, clear into late September or early October. As I said earlier, once we get into July you can also start planting a lot of those crops you planted in March and April including potatoes, cole crops and carrots.

Sweet corn is an odd child that is not well suited to most home gardens, especially small gardens. For a successful sweet corn planting it needs to be heavily fertilized and then big enough for adequate pollination. In corn the tassel is the male flower that sheds pollen and the ear is the female flower that receives the pollen on the silks. You need to have a lot of tassels shedding pollen to ensure that you have ears well filled out with kernels. I recommend a minimum of about eight rows fifty feet long. Small plots rarely produce well pollinated ears.

Finally tomatoes. Tomatoes are heat loving plants. You really want to have soil temperatures that are staying above 60 degrees before you transplant your tomatoes. If you plant too early, the roots aren't able to take up potassium in the cold soils and the plants can literally turn purple. They'll turn green quick enough when it warms up, but this cold shock will often cause the plant to revert back to vegetative growth and it will delay blooming and setting fruit even longer. The hope of the first tomatoes in the neighborhood are dashed!

Get out there and start planting! The soil is warming up and except for sweet potatoes it's safe to start getting everything going in the garden. And then comes the weeding, watering, hoeing, fertilizing, more weeding....