

Time to Start Gardening

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

While many people think you have to have your potatoes planted on St. Patrick's Day, for most people the gardening season starts the very end of March. The key reason for this is soil temperatures. Mother Nature, and garden plants, don't care about the calendar. They respond to sunshine, air temperatures, moisture and especially the aforementioned soil temperatures.

March weather can be a roller coaster not only for air temperatures but for soil temperatures too. Most of our early season garden crops need fairly consistent two inch deep soil temperatures above 50 degrees. While we've hit that on several occasions in March, we then seem to have cold weather, or a cold rain/snow on a couple of occasions plummet it right back down into the low 40s. But by the time we get to the end of March, increasing minutes of daylight and warming weather generally get us on an increasing soil temperature pattern.

First and foremost, you need to understand your garden crops. We are still six weeks away from the recommended tomato and pepper planting date. So just put those out of your mind for the time being. Remember that tomatoes are easily cold shocked by soil temperatures below about 65 degrees. Cold shocked tomatoes will just sit there and do nothing for quite some time thereby foiling your hopes of having the first tomatoes in the neighborhood. Wait until about Mother's Day to transplant your tomatoes.

In late March and early April we should be focusing on those cool weather garden crops, those that can tolerate cool to cold soils and the occasional frosty morning. Many of our root crops, leafy greens, or cole crops (cabbage and its relatives) fall into this category. For root crops we can be planting beets, potatoes, radishes, turnips and onions - both plants and sets - in very late March and early April. Leafy greens would be spinach and the various lettuce types. Head lettuce is not well suited to Kansas, but leaf lettuce, soft head (sometimes called buttercrunch) and Romaine will do well in the spring (and late summer/early fall) in Kansas. Cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli should be getting transplanted now as well. Once we get into the very end of April and early May, the window starts to open for planting a lot of different vegetable crops.

Starting your garden now is dependent on a couple of things. The first of those is having your garden tilled and ready to go. After four very dry months it's been wonderful to see some rainfall again. But if you haven't tilled your garden yet, getting the soil dry enough to till without making a lot of clods can be challenging. Those gardeners who want to plant early gardens generally solve this problem by tilling the garden in the late fall so it's ready to go at this time of year. If the garden is tilled it doesn't take very long for the surface soil to dry out enough to scratch in a few rows of seed, potatoes or onions. You don't want to till soil when it's muddy wet as it will result in a lot of clods that are hard as rocks and will plague you the rest of the growing season. You may also want to take a soil sample from your garden plot soon (about one pint of soil) and bring it to the Extension Office where we can get it analyzed for you.

A couple of great resource for planning your vegetable garden are the bulletins Vegetable Garden Planting Guide and Recommended Vegetable Varieties. You can pick those up at the extension office or find them on line at: <http://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/mf315.pdf> and <http://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/L41.pdf>