

How Soon Can I Start Planting My Garden

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If you are a gardener, spring fever is very real and it can be VERY intense. Every day in February when the temperature ventures north of 60, the fever gets cranked up. Unfortunately, it can lead to disaster if it is not reined in by common sense, or caring family members. But March is just a week away so how soon can you get started in the garden?

Yes, many years we can start our vegetable gardens in March, but cautiously. The small town church that I grew up in, in Nebraska, had several older gentlemen, Swedish descendants, that were good gardeners and I always enjoyed talking to them. To this day I remember one evening, visiting with one of them and in his still fairly thick Swedish accent say, "If you want to grow good peas, you plant dem early and you plant dem deep!"

Peas are one of the earliest vegetable crops that we can plant, in some ways even earlier than potatoes. One thing to keep in mind is that plants don't pay attention to calendars. They pay attention to soil temperature first, then air temperature once they are out of the ground. Peas can start germinating at 40 degrees. They may not germinate very fast, but they will germinate. Soil temperatures are currently running in the mid 40s, but just a couple of cloudy days and cold nights and that can be back down to the thirties.

Potatoes are another crop that we think about planting early in the season. Potatoes will start to grow, slowly, in the mid 40s. They'll do better with temperatures above 50 though. Many people get hung up on this myth that you have to plant potatoes on St. Patrick's Day. Some years it can work, this year may be one of those years, and other years I've planted in mid March and they didn't come out of the ground until mid-April.

There are other early season crops that can be in the mix too - broccoli can be set out about as early as peas can be planted. Cabbage and cauliflower need to wait just a little bit longer. Lettuce can germinate as temperatures as low as 35 degrees. It germinates a lot faster at 70 degrees, but you can plant it early, and just be patient.

The other thing to consider is air temperature once the plants are out of the ground. We can have below zero temperatures clear into mid March and single digit lows into early April. Not every year, but they aren't out of the question. Anytime you push the season a week or so, you are at risk. You can go ahead and plant early, but don't put all your proverbial eggs into one basket, so to speak. Plant some early with the knowledge that replanting may be necessary.

With all that said, how early can you start? It depends on your garden spot. A fall tilled garden can generally be planted earlier. If you have a dry year, you can do a spring tillage, but many years, waiting for a spring till is going to slow you down as cold soils do not dry out very fast. Then it's a function of how much sunlight your garden gets to help warm it up. The following dates are approximations of when, and I take no liability if your seed rots in the ground! Early date for peas, lettuce and broccoli is March 10th. For potatoes, radish, turnips, cauliflower and cabbage, March 20th. And for beets, spinach and onions, March 25th. Personally, I will be adding about five days to each of those.

I'm a gardener too and I fully understand the urge, the need, to start getting things planted. But I'm also enough of an observer of the weather, and Mother Nature's vagaries to know that everything I plant may be lost. Hang in there a few more weeks fellow gardeners, and we should be in pretty good shape!