

Get Ready, Get Set – Garden!

By Kate O’Lenic, Master Gardener

Now that you’ve had time to peruse all those seed and plant catalogs, it’s time to take action. Decide what you want to plant, whether it is vegetables or flowers or both. Order those seeds and get your seed-starting supplies ready. Get out the graph paper or whatever you use to draw out the garden plan. It’s finally time to get your hands dirty and garden.

Remember we suggested keeping a garden journal? Pull it out to review what you did last year. What grew well, what was a bit disappointing and where did you plant all those things? Also consider where you might have seen some diseases on your plants. Those diseases can still be lurking in the soil, so you should consider planting a different family of crop that won’t be affected by the disease. Potato beetles could also be lurking near last year’s patch. Planting something different may also be needed if last year’s plants depleted the soil of nutrients like heavy feeders – tomatoes and potatoes. A very helpful factsheet about how to plan crop rotation is available at: <https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/crop-rotation/>. Another resource article is available at: <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/files/2014/11/Using-Crop-Rotation-in-the-Home-Vegetable-Garden.pdf>. Also, make a note in your journal that in 2023 the USDA revised plant hardiness zones. Johnson City, TN is now 7b with an increase in minimum temperatures of +5 degrees. Previously it was 7a. (<https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>) It’s a small change but an important bit of information to have.

If not already done last fall, consider having your soil tested. There’s still time to add lime to adjust pH if needed. But it needs to be done now so it has time to work its magic. Contact your county extension agent for instructions and sampling containers.

There are a couple of other things to think about. What about watering. Think back to last year. Is there a way to make it easier and more efficient? Soaker hoses or drip irrigation are much better than over-head sprinklers. They provide water to plants more efficiently and reduce the risk of disease by keeping leaves dry. They are also less work. You don’t have to drag out hoses to water each time. You can lay out the soaker hoses and leave them all season in the garden.

Maybe you’d like to try raised bed gardening. Now is a good time to get busy constructing them. The Johnson City Press ran Earl Hockin’s article about raised bed gardens on March 11, 2023. Check it out or go to: <https://extension.wvu.edu/lawn-gardening-pests/gardening/creative-gardening/raised-bed-gardening>.

How are you going to control weeds? Pine straw and wheat straw are good mulches. Wood chips work well, too. In addition to suppressing weeds, mulches help retain moisture. Mulch will also reduce your labor time so you don’t have to hand pull or hoe weeds. Chemicals can be used but we promote an organic approach to gardening and recommend avoiding chemicals as much as possible.

Last but not least, which seeds should be started soon and which should seeds should be started later? Do you have a cold or hot frame, a greenhouse or a place indoors to get seeds started? A terrific article about cold and hot frames and how to build them is at:

<https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g6965>. You can even use glass jars as cloches to protect your seed sprouts started early outdoors. Some vegetable plants do best as transplants. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants are some examples. Starting those seeds soon will go a long way to successful crops. Which seeds you start depends on when the transplants should be moved outdoors.

Vegetables that enjoy cool weather and can tolerate a light frost include chard, beets, radishes, cabbage, kale, and peas. Cabbage takes 10 to 12 days to germinate and 5 to 6 weeks to grow before transplanting. It can be planted outdoors about 4 weeks **before** the last frost which on average is April 19th in the Johnson City area. (<https://extension.psu.edu/vegetable-planting-and-transplanting-guide>). Counting back 10 weeks gives us a seed starting date of February 9th. Cauliflower and broccoli are about the same. Use the guide to help you determine what you can start now and later. You can use a handy chart for seed starting times at: <https://extension.wvu.edu/lawn-gardening-pests/gardening/gardening-101/seed-starting>.

The University of Tennessee has a handy 2024 Tennessee Home Fruit and Vegetable Calendar available at: <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/12/W436.pdf>. It can keep you and your garden on track all year long.

Well, you certainly have quite the to-do list now. Enough of the dormant winter. Let's get gardening!

More resources

“Getting Your Vegetable Garden Ready Spring” <https://extension.psu.edu/getting-your-vegetable-garden-ready-for-spring>

“Prepare for your spring vegetable garden now”
<https://site.extension.uga.edu/colquitthomeowners/2022/02/prepare-for-your-spring-vegetable-garden-now/>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.