

## April Gardening Duties By Teresa Gaffner

April is here and it's time to get busy **outside** in the garden. Hopefully, by now, you've had time to clean up and prepare your lawn and garden beds. If not, there is still time to remove debris, prune dead or diseased branches and do a thorough cleanup before adding soil amendments. Your early spring bloomers should be finishing up this month and the end of April is a good time to prune your Forsythia bushes. Get out your lawn tools that have been overwintering and do some basic maintenance. Check hand tools for cleanliness, loose handles, and blade sharpness. Roll out the lawn mower and check the spark plugs, engine, and blades. Lawn mower tune up kits are available everywhere and are easy to use. This month is still a good time to transplant trees and shrubs. The weather is cooler and gives the plants time to establish a strong root system.

However, even though April in the Tri-Cities is a beautiful time of year, this early in the season we still have to consider the dreaded **frost dates**. Understanding our areas predicted frost dates can help you save money and heartache as your garden's success also depends on soil temperature and the effect it can have on young plant roots. So, what exactly are these dates? A frost date is the average date of the last frost in spring or the first frost in fall. Per the National Weather Service there are three main classifications of frost and freezing temperatures: frost, freeze and hard freeze.

- Frost occurs when temperatures fall to 36°F or below which can kill tender plants and seedlings.
- Freeze warnings are issued for temperatures 29° to 32°F. Severe damage can occur to semi-hardy plants and hardy deciduous plants along with their more tender counterparts.
- A hard freeze occurs at temperatures below 28°F or less and can damage most garden plants. Almost everyone in the Tri-Cities area has lost a garden favorite due to a severe late freeze.

So, how do we find out the frost dates for our area and how do we prepare for them? The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) divisions, National Weather Service and National Centers for Environmental Information, collect and analyze temperature data to predict the average first and last frost dates based on a rolling 30 years temperatures history. The dates are presented as a range and can vary greatly based on weather patterns. Checking current weather at [forecast.weather.gov](http://forecast.weather.gov) or your local weather station is the best bet for the most accurate information.

Protect your plants from freezing weather by bringing in your houseplants and covering the ones in your garden beds with a blanket or row cover to trap existing heat. Keep a set of old clean sheets or blankets at the ready specifically to cover vulnerable garden plants when the temperature drops. Row covers come in many different materials, but they also must be kept clean between uses. If you want to find out more about protecting plants during a freeze, check out the resources listed at the end of this article. If you are not sure if your vegetable plants are considered tender or hardy, refer to the following list as a guide:

- Hardy/cool season vegetables, including asparagus, broccoli, cabbage, onions, peas, and spinach, can be planted as soon as the soil is workable in early spring. This usually ranges between 45 and 60 days before the average last frost. These same vegetables can be safely planted until the average last frost date.
- Semi-hardy plants, such as beets, carrots, lettuce, and potatoes, can be planted one to two weeks after the hardy group. These can also be planted until the average last frost date.
- Tender vegetables, such as celery, cucumbers, corn, and most beans, should be planted on the average last frost date.
- Very tender/ warm season plants, such as squash, beans, melons, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers, should not be planted until at least a week after the average last frost. Even if frost does not occur before this time, these plants will not grow well and are more susceptible to disease until warmer weather.

### **Additional Resources:**

“Row covers” <https://extension.usu.edu/pests/research/row-covers>

“The Tennessee Vegetable Garden Season Extension Methods”  
<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-F.pdf>

“Protecting Fruit trees from Winter Injury”  
<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP307-G.pdf>

“Tennessee Home Fruit and Vegetable Garden W 436 2023 CALENDAR”  
<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W436.pdf>

### **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](http://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.