

The February Gardener

By Teresa Gaffner, Master Gardener

We have Leap Year February but it's still a short month - only 29 days long. Spring gardening is just around the corner. Now is the time to pull out all those garden plans you made this winter and get started. There are plenty of hands-on planning, prepping and maintenance tasks to take care of this month. This is the time to till your vegetable beds and incorporate compost and other soil amendments. You can prune your grape vines, brambles, and blueberry bushes now. Check your trees and bushes for potential damage after the recent severe winter storm. Remove any dead and damaged branches and go through your garden beds checking for debris. You might see some weeds starting up, stay on top of removing them now so they will not become an issue later. The University of Tennessee has just published its 2024 Home Garden Fruit and Vegetable Calendar. It has great suggestions on what fruit crops to pick for success in your garden and how to get started now for a bumper summer crop. Here's the link <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/12/W436.pdf>.

This is the perfect time to sow seeds indoors to get a jump start on your spring garden beds so they will be ready by the end of April or the beginning of May. Here is a link to a Fact Sheet from the University of New Hampshire on growing seeds indoors. <https://extension.unh.edu/resource/starting-plants-seed-fact-sheet> It has great visuals and covers growing medias, lighting, watering, special preparation for some seeds and hardening-off of seedlings. Some suggestions for seeds to start in February for summer veggies include tomatoes, peppers, and herbs. You can get a head start on your flower beds by starting seeds indoors for petunias, sweet peas, alyssum, and geraniums.

To be successful sowing seeds indoors, we need to determine the last frost date for the Tri-Cities area. According to the annual reports released by the NOAA, the typical last freeze for our area occurs around April 16th and the average last frost date occurs around April 29th. However, NOAA warns that our region can have a 20% chance of a frost date as late as the second week of May. Every year is different, and you will need to monitor the weather forecast. It is always better to plant later than earlier. If you let the soil warm up before you plant, your garden will grow faster and stronger.

Hardening-off your seedlings is very important. You have invested so much time and effort to bringing these seedlings along, you don't want to lose them by shocking them with temperature and environmental changes. The hardening-off process simply means acclimating the seedlings to their new environment. About a week or two before you plan to put your young plants in the ground, place your seedlings in a shady, warm place outside for a few hours. Bring them back in overnight. Repeat the process daily adding a few hours each time, bringing them in before the colder evening temperatures. By the end of the process, they should be ready to go into a prepared garden bed. If the weather does turn bad after your plants are in the ground, don't despair. There are ways to keep your plants safe. Check out this link for information on protecting your garden during a late freeze. <https://newswire.caes.uga.edu/story/4043/protect-plants-from-frost.html>.

If you need help getting started, be sure to ask us for advice. Below is information about how to contact us.

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.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.