

Cool Season Gardening

By Earl Hockin, Master Gardener

Cool season vegetable and flower gardening in our area begins in February and lasts till late May. February is the time to ensure your gardening tools are clean and sharpened. For container plantings, February is a good time to refresh the soil if not done in the past 2 or 3 years. Refresh them by emptying them out and then mixing 1/3rd old soil with 1/3rd new potting soil and 1/3rd compost. February is the time to prune fruit trees, berry bushes and other woody ornamentals while they are still dormant. If you haven't done so within the last 5 years, it is a good idea to test the soil. The most accurate soil tests are done by the University of Tennessee. Contact your county extension agent for test kits. See the link below for details about soil testing.

Get your final seed orders done quickly as seed companies will be running out of popular varieties. An advantage to ordering seeds from different seed companies is that you can get varieties that are not typically sold at the big box stores or local garden centers, such as new varieties and unusual vegetables from other countries or zones. Additionally, unless you have a very large garden, a package of seeds will have more seeds than you will want to plant this year. Store the extra seeds in a plastic or glass container in a refrigerator or cool location and they will last for several years. Remember to check that the seeds are free of pesticides, especially **neonicotinoids**. See the article at this link about this toxic agent <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/neonicotinoids-101-effects-humans-and-bees>.

Peas are a cool season vegetable but germinate best at room temperature. Place pea seeds between two layers of wet paper towels in an open plastic bag or container in your kitchen or another warm room. They will start to germinate in 5 to 7 days. As soon their roots are visible you can plant them outdoors any time after February 14th. Plant the germinated seeds about one inch deep and 6 inches or so apart.

Other cool season plants to start indoors in early February include broccoli, spinach, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, collards, leeks, parsley, Swiss chard, and onions. Some flowers to start now are butterfly weed, blanket flower, helianthus, hibiscus, bee balm, phlox, black-eyed Susan, and salvia. If starting seeds indoors do so in seed-starting soil which is lightweight, contains the ideal amount of nutrients and drains well. Garden soil and potting soil are too heavy and will not drain well and may lack nutrients. You can either buy seed-starting mix or make your own. To make you own start with 4 parts good quality compost, one part perlite, one part vermiculite and two parts rehydrated coir. Mix the ingredients well in a large container. Be sure your mix drains well. If not, add more perlite. Do not use peat moss as it is a non-renewable resource and best serves our planet when in peat bogs to combat climate change. If you can get worm castings, add some to your seed starting mix. Fill your seed starting containers with the seed-starting mix and add water to moisten the soil. Plant the seeds on top and add seed-starting mix to the depth recommended on seed package. Gently spray water on top to moisten the soil. Cover the containers with clear plastic, and place where the temperature is about 60F to 70F and light from a window, fluorescent, or LED bulbs is provided.

Kale, spinach, onions, and parsley can be transplanted outdoors as early as March 6th, especially if they are grown under garden fabric (row cover). The rest of the vegetables can be transplanted late March or early April. Before transplanting be sure to harden them off for at least 4 days by putting them outside in sunlight initially for 2 hours then increasing by an hour each day. Virtually all the flowers can be transplanted April 15th after hardening them off.

Resources

“Soil Analysis,” <https://soillab.tennessee.edu/soil-analysis-2/>

“Starting a Garden: Cool-Season Vegetables | And my top 5 cool-season crops to grow,”

<https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/good-growing/2020-03-26-starting-garden-cool-season-vegetables-and-my-top-5-cool-season-crops>

“Cool-Season Flowering Annuals for the Garden,”

<https://extension.sdstate.edu/cool-season-flowering-annuals-garden>

“Guide to Spring-Planted Cool-Season Vegetables,”

https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=utk_agexgard

“Leafy Crops for the Tennessee Vegetable Garden,”

<https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/D68.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. 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.