

March Vegetable Gardening

By Earl Hockin, Master Gardener

March is definitely when we can begin our gardening season. Cool season vegetables can be sown or transplanted in March. In the first two weeks of March, arugula, kale, collards, kohlrabi, lettuce, mustard, parsnip, spinach, peas, cilantro, radish, and calendula can be direct-sown. Early March is also the time to plant onion bulbs. Cover your plantings with row cover or build a loop hoop structure with row cover to protect them from unusual cold weather and insects and to warm the soil. Row cover enables one to begin planting two weeks earlier than the average last frost date for our zone.

Early March is also the time to start the seeds of warm season plants that you want to transplant between mid-April and the beginning of May. Mid to late March is when you should plant Irish potatoes. It is best to plant day-neutral onions, also called intermediate onions, which include varieties such as Candy, Sierra Blanca, Red Candy, Early Yellow Globe, White Portugal, Italian Red Tokyo, and Long White. During the last two weeks of March, you can also direct sow beets, chard, turnips, carrots, dill, and parsley.

If you are wondering about dates for planting at your precise location, use the 2023 updated federal plant hardiness zone map at <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>. When you are at the site you will see the map that shows the entire country. On the left-hand side you will see 4 symbols. If you select the circular symbol, the map will change to your exact location with the color of your plant hardiness zone. You can also enter your zip code to find your zone.

When sowing seeds and transplanting seedlings it is important to have suitable soil temperature. To measure soil temperature, use a thermometer and sink it to a depth of four inches or so and leave it there for three minutes. Most seed packages will describe what temperatures are advised for sowing seeds and transplanting seedlings.

- At a soil temperature of 40°F, plant arugula, kale, lettuces, parsnips, peas, radicchio, radishes, and spinach. You can transplant cool season vegetables like broccoli and cabbage.
- At a soil temperature of 50°F, direct seed Chinese cabbage, leeks, onions, Swiss chard, and turnips.
- At a soil temperature of 60°F, direct seed beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, and cauliflower.

Another consideration is frost dates. To find your first or last frost dates go to: <https://scacis.rcc-acis.org/>. To help you navigate the site, instructions are provided below.

Under Product Selection, click on Single-Station Products

- Select First/Last Dates
- For year range enter that you like. I choose to enter 2000 to 2022
- Under Criteria select Min temp and for <= enter 32
- For Period beginning select AUG 1
- Under Pair results by: Select Calendar year
- For Additional options check mark
- Set maximum missing values
- Allowable missing days enter the number 5
- Include value
- Under Station/Area selection in the search bar Type in Bristol TN
- Then click on the magnifying glass “search symbol” A map will appear and you will see various Blue Pins on the map of the area

If you click on the down arrow in the “Station Bar” you can select a number of local stations including Kingsport, Elizabethton, Mountain City. Choose one, then click on the word GO, this causes the map to disappear, but will show a table at the bottom of the page. Scroll to the bottom and to view the last and first day of frost for the range that you entered in step 4.

University of Virginia and University of Tennessee have more resources for estimated planting dates.

University of Virginia gardening calendar: <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-331/426-331.html>

University of Tennessee 2024 gardening calendar: <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2024/02/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. 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.