

April Vegetable Gardening (Published 4/6/2024)

By Earl Hockin, Master Gardener

April is a significant vegetable gardening month, though we may experience some nights of frost during the first two weeks. If you are worried about frost, you can protect your plants by laying a sheet of cloth over them at night. An even better choice is to use row cover, which comes in different weights. The lightweight type lets about 85% of the light through and protects down as low as 28F. It is very useful in spring and fall to protect from frost. It can be left on plants that don't need pollinating even in the summer to protect them from insects.

If you are growing your vegetables in raised beds remember that the soil will warm up earlier in the spring and stay warmer later in the fall than garden soil. This enables sowing and transplanting earlier than when doing so in the ground. Most cool season vegetables can be sown or transplanted when the soil temperature is 40F or warmer. Check the soil temperature early morning to see how cold it got overnight. For sowing seeds, measure the soil temperatures down to 2 inches. If you are transplanting seedlings, check the soil temperature at a depth of 4 inches.

Early April is the time to be sowing seeds for root crops including beets, carrots, turnips radish, and parsnips. It is also the time to sow seeds for lettuce, spinach and chard, celery, arugula, and cilantro. Remember that lettuce needs light to germinate, so simply place the seeds on the top of the soil and then press down on them to ensure they are in good contact with the soil. If you want to cover them, do so with no more than 1/8 inch of soil.

Onion bulbs starters and Irish potatoes should also be put in the ground during the cooler part of April if not already planted. Cabbage, broccoli, kohlrabi, collards, and kale need to be be transplanted no later than early April as these cool season plants will stop growing or bolt when the daytime temperatures get into the 80s. Plant them early enough to mature beforehand.

Before planting cool-weather crops started indoors, harden-off young plants such as broccoli, cauliflower, kohlrabi, leeks, onions, lettuce, and peas by reducing their water supply and putting them outdoors for 4 or 5 days. On the first day leave them outdoors for 2 hours, the next day for 3 hours, on the third day for 5 hours, and on the fourth day for at least 6 hours. You can then plant them on the fifth day. If you are starting your own transplants for tomatoes, eggplants and peppers you should do so no later than the first week of April.

The end of April is the time to be start planting warm season vegetables. You can sow seeds for pole beans and bush beans, cucumbers, all varieties of squash, corn, okra, and Chinese cabbage. It is also the time you can begin transplanting tomatoes, eggplant, and peppers once the soil temperature is 60F.

This month is also the time for planting herbs such as dill, fennel, parsley, and sage. You can sow seeds for basil or start them indoors in early April. By the way, basil is a great companion plant for tomatoes as it helps deter some insect pests such as aphids, whiteflies and thrips. Flowers to interplant in your vegetable garden to add color, attract pollinators and deter some insect pests are nasturtiums and marigolds.

Last year the US Department of Agriculture updated the Plant hardiness Zone Map. The website is <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/> Put your zip code in the space on the map, click on the circle symbol on the left side and the map will zoom into your actual location so you can see what hardiness zone your garden is in. This is a useful guide to minimum temperature in winter. Knowing your plant hardiness zone can be useful for researching information about plants including perennials, annual flowers, trees, or shrubs, that are native to your zone.

Resources

“Using Row Covers,” <https://extension.unh.edu/blog/2020/10/using-row-covers-garden>

“Tennessee Home Fruit and Vegetable Garden 2024 Calendar,”

<https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2024/02/W436.pdf>

FREE Presentation

Dr. Doug Tallamy is the T. A. Baker Professor of Agriculture in the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware. He is a leader in native plant horticulture. He will present “Learn more about nature gardening”.

May 6, 2024, 6:30pm EST

Register at:

<https://tennessee.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZ0uc-qspz0pHdSx0-0v-Xfo3sSWPDiT7hnx>

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.