

Be Patient When Planting Your Garden

by Phyllis Pugnetti

It's surprising how many gardeners plant their entire garden on a sunny day in mid-May and consider the job done! This is convenient but won't always get you the best results. Some plants can be planted in early April, others want to wait until June or July; and a few prefer to be planted in August for a winter or spring harvest.

Usually by the first part of April, the soil in a cold frame or low tunnel will have warmed enough for you to plant cool weather crops like peas, carrots, radishes, and lettuce. Once seeds sprout and have their first two true leaves, crack open the low tunnel just a little to prevent overheating, especially on bright sunny days. You only need to close the cold frame or low tunnel if temperatures are expected to dip below 45° for an extended time, or when there are strong winds.

If you don't have a cold frame or low tunnel, you can find simple instructions online, to build either type of cover for a garden bed. Setting up cold frames and low tunnels in early to mid-March allows about a month for the soil to warm before you set out plants. Soil temperature is



more important than air temperatures. Cold frames and low tunnels are not a must but will guarantee an early start in the garden.

Carrots and radishes come in short season and long season varieties. In our climate you can plant short season varieties in early spring and again in late summer. However, long season varieties are planted in the middle August or early September. Most radish varieties are short season and include common varieties like, *Cherry Bell* and *Sparkler*. Short season carrots include *Nantes*, *Danvers* and *Little Fingers*. These like to be planted in early spring so they're ready for harvest before the excessive heat of summer causes them to become bitter, tough, woody, or bug damaged. On the other hand, long season varieties will only develop large bulky roots when planted in late summer for a winter or spring harvest. Long season varieties grow very large and include *China Rose*, *Giant Cherry* and *Watermelon* radishes that develop a crunchy texture more like carrots and are very winter hardy. Carrot varieties like, *Autumn King*, *Chantenay*, *Yellowstone*, and *Flakkee* should be planted early enough to grow to about 80% of their full size before consistently cold weather arrives. Under a thick layer of mulch, they will continue to grow slowly throughout the winter and early spring. The cold winter weather causes carrots and radishes to convert starches to sugar making them much sweeter than spring varieties. Winter radishes can grow to the size of tennis balls while winter carrots can grow up to a foot long, often reaching sizes of one to two pounds.



Leafy plants like, lettuce, chard, arugula, mustards, and watercress can be direct seeded around the middle of April, or

even earlier when they're under cover of a cold frame or low tunnel. Plant the seeds and they will sprout whenever the temperatures are right for them. Be assured that they'll be up and growing well before your warm weather seedlings are ready to transplant.

Other plants like corn, melons, squash, and cucumbers need the air and soil to be very warm, with later planting dates, around the middle of June. Although these do very well by sowing seed directly into the garden bed, they can get off to an early start by sowing seed indoors 3-4 weeks before transplanting into the garden. Once again, your planting date will be determined by nature. Wait until both the soil and air temperatures consistently remain above 65°. Starting seed early is important for heat loving plants, otherwise they may not have enough warm days to fully ripen. This is especially true of varieties that take more than 100 days to reach maturity.

The very last crops to go into the garden are cilantro, garlic, Sweet Cicely (herb), and perennial onion—also called potato onion. These are planted in September and October. Allow them to grow until the first hard frost then add 3-4 inches of mulch to protect the roots through freeze-thaw cycles. In the spring these plants will be among the first to grace our gardens.

In gardening, patience is imperative. Planting early doesn't always assure success. Cold soil and cold nighttime temperatures can permanently stunt or kill baby plants. Careful planning of planting dates will contribute to plant vigor, high yields, and the overall success of your garden.

If you have any gardening questions don't hesitate to call our WSU Master Gardener clinic at 509-574-1604 or email us at gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.