

A Greener View: Spring is coming, but don't rush to plant

by Jeff_Rugg

Spring is coming and many of us want it to be here already.

For many areas of the country, the last half of winter was not warm and mild. March came in like a lion, but eventually, we will get to the warm weather. As we get a few warm days, many people are inclined to start planting, but until your last frost date is past, it is still not the time to plant annual flowers. If you really want to rush to have spring flowers, it would have been better to have planted bulbs last fall. If you plant annuals in the northern half of North America during March or April, then remember the old nurseryman's saying: plant early and plant often.

During the early spring, when I have been to the Gulf Coast, West Coast or anywhere to the north, I have seen irresponsible discount stores that have begun carrying annuals and warm season vegetables weeks before they can be safely planted.

Buy plants early to get the best choice, because they will not take good care of them anyway. But, plan on how you will take care of them after you get them home. They will need full sun because they had been growing in a greenhouse. They will need to be watered and they will need to be protected from frost. Otherwise, it is probably better to buy plants from a knowledgeable garden center at the proper time. They will get you the varieties that grow best in your area and will take care of them until you and the weather say it is time to plant.

One good way to reduce your use of pesticides in the garden is to use plant varieties that are resistant to insects and disease. Each year new varieties are released, so check label. Plant varieties that have won an All-America selection award should do well. They have had to do well at test sites nationwide to win. Another good designation on the label to look for is "F1 Hybrid." This signifies a cross that is usually very vigorous and produces the most flowers or fruit.

Once spring arrives, most gardeners want to till the garden soil. For an earlier start and better results, adding organic matter and rototilling the garden should be done in the fall when the soil is dry.

Do not rush things in the spring. Trying to till soil that is too wet will destroy its structure and water holding capacity. Garden soil is tillable if you can gently squeeze it into a ball, but it still breaks apart when gently poked. Sandy garden soil does not hold enough water to cause this problem

Before tilling, add several inches of compost and 1.5 pounds of 10-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square feet and till them both into the top 10 inches of soil. Do not use a fertilizer that already has herbicides or insecticides in it. Do not add lime, gypsum or sulfur without a soil test showing a need for them.

If you have ordered garden plants or bare-root trees and shrubs through the mail, be prepared to take care of them until you can plant them. Always open and inspect the shipment when it arrives. Check for damage and the health of the order and check to see if you got what you ordered. It is critical to keep the root system moist. Put plants in a cool, not-too-bright location and plant them as soon as you can.

Checking the garden every day is the best way to keep ahead of problems. Weeds are easy to pull when small and a few aphids on the end of a branch are easier to kill than when the whole plant is engulfed. Start a notebook about the garden. Make a plan and keep the plant packets for reference. You will want to know estimated harvest times later on.

Plant tall vegetables like corn or place tall arbors on the north side of your garden, so they do not shade the other plants. Add a flower border for beauty, butterflies and pollinating bees. Make a path out of mulch. Use lots of mulch to conserve water, reduce weeds and keep fruit off the soil where it often rots.

Know what kind of plants you are going to use. Annuals bloom during this season, produce fruit and then die with the first frost. They should be put in new locations in the garden each year to slow any chance of disease and insects overwintering and harming them. Most garden vegetables are annuals.

Biennials live two seasons and only bloom in the second season. They must be left in place if you want flowers. Most biennials are grown for leaves in the first year. Lettuce, cabbage, caraway and parsley are biennials.

Perennials are long lasting plants that come up from the roots each spring. They bloom each summer after they are established. Some, like asparagus and rhubarb are grown for their stems and leaves.

Because perennials are not going to be moved, they should not be planted in the middle of the garden. It is hard enough to use a rototiller without having to try to go around things.

Perennials also need good soil conditions before they are planted. It is best to mix organic matter into the soil a couple of feet deep and for several feet in all directions. It is a lot of work, but it will pay off with much better growth for many more years.

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