

April 2009

Vegetable and Herb Gardening Tips

- Turn under oats, vetch, rye and other fall-planted cover crops in the vegetable garden. They will require a few weeks to break down in the soil prior to planting vegetable crops. Do not add fresh farm manure to vegetable beds. Only well-composted manures should be used. Soluble fertilizers can be mixed with water and applied to the foliage or root-zone of spring crops to get them off to a fast start. Seaweed extracts, fish emulsion, and compost teas can also be used as a liquid fertilizer.
- Continue to start sowing seeds of spinach, lettuce, kale, mustard, and other greens indoors under fluorescent tubes. These plants will be ready to transplant outdoors in 2 weeks and should be protected by a floating row cover. Or direct seed these crops in loose, fertile garden soil covered with a cold frame or floating row cover.
- Tomato, eggplant, and pepper, seeds can still be started indoors under lights. They need 6-8 weeks to grow to a good size for transplanting. Keep the growing medium moist, not soaking wet. Seedlings may keel over and die due to pathogenic water molds if the mix remains too wet.

The key factors in getting early tomatoes are:

1. Select early season cultivars that ripen 55-65 days after transplanting.
 2. Warm the soil where the roots grow and the air where the plant grows. Lay down black plastic mulch 2-3 weeks before planting to warm the soil.
 3. After planting, surround the transplants with some type of plastic enclosure open at the top. A tomato cage surrounded by clear plastic sheeting works well. Fill plastic soda bottles with water and line them up inside the cage close to the plants. The water will heat up in the day and release the heat at night. Be prepared to throw a quilt over the cage on nights when the temperature dips into the 30s. Wall-O-Water is a commercially available plant protector that has produced good results for local tomato gardeners.
- Beans and corn can be sown where soil temperatures are above 50°F. Consider pre-sprouting the seed indoors to get them off to a fast start in the garden and eliminate the need for thinning. Squash, melon and cucumber plants can be started indoors now as well and grown for 2-3 weeks before transplanting into the garden. This early start may help you avoid problems with the squash vine borer. Be prepared to protect young plants from cucumber beetles using an insecticide, repellent or row cover.
 - Avoid the temptation to set out warm season crops until after all danger of late frosts. This would be late May in Western Maryland, May 10-15 in Central Maryland and April 25-May 5 in Southern Maryland and on the Eastern Shore. Cool night temperatures in April will cause the first tomato fruits to become deformed or "cat faced". Be prepared to cover tender transplants with paper bags, blankets or other materials if frosts are anticipated.
 - Harden off transplants one week prior to transplanting to toughen the plants and ready them for outdoor conditions. This is done by leaving transplants in a protected outdoor location for 4-8 hours each day and returning them indoors before dusk. Plants are further hardened by cutting back on fertilizing and watering.
 - Mix in a handful of finely ground lime, either calcitic or hydrated, with the planting soil of each pepper and tomato transplant to prevent blossom-end rot.
 - Be sure that all plants and planted rows are clearly marked with the cultivar name and date planted.

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Insects

- Poor germination, spotty emergence and weak stands of vegetable plants may be caused by seed corn maggots that attack large seeds and small seedlings during cool, wet springs. You can minimize problems by pre-germinating corn and bean seed indoors from mid- to late-April planting.
- Cutworms are nocturnal pests of vegetable plants that chew through plant stems and drag young plants into underground burrows. Place a cardboard or plastic collar around plants to prevent feeding or apply a rough or gritty material, like ground up oyster shell or sharp sand, around vulnerable plants.

Herbs

- Rosemary, thyme, lavender, sage, basil, and tarragon seeds can be started indoors at this time. Fresh tarragon, rosemary, and mint sprigs can be purchased in food markets and rooted indoors in a soil less mix to be grown under cool white fluorescent bulbs. The new plants can then be set outdoors in pots or garden beds in May.