

Hooray, hooray, it's finally May; vegetable gardening starts today. First, let me say, I realize many gardeners have already started their vegetable gardens. The fact is I am not known for throwing caution to the wind. I prefer to wait until May before I begin vegetable gardening. After all, in central Nebraska we can still expect a killing frost up to May 15.

Cool weather crops prefer and can tolerate cooler temperatures that readily exist in spring and fall. Often referred to as Cole crops, they include cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kohlrabi, and kale. Most gardeners will grow these spring crops from transplants rather than seeding directly into the soil. However, when grown as fall crops, they are often seeded directly into the garden in mid-to-late summer. Early spring is also an opportune time to plant potato tubers and onion sets.

Due to my cautious nature, I prefer to wait until mid-May or even late-May before I set out seedlings of warmer season crops. These include tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and squash — all which prefer warm weather and warm soil.

Whether seedlings are cool season crops or warm season crops, they all need to be hardened-off before planting in the garden. Hardening-off is the process of getting seedlings acclimated to environmental conditions in the garden. Cool temperatures, wind, rain and bright sunlight can be harsh on young plants that were started and raised indoors. Ideally, it's best to expose seedlings gradually to outdoor conditions. Take a week or so to harden off plants by first moving them outdoors to a shady location during the day and bringing them in at night. Gradually the seedlings are exposed to direct sunlight for longer periods. I offer a word of caution. Keep an eye on the weather. Nebraska's springtime weather can change quickly. A day might easily start out sunny and balmy and minutes later produce torrential rains with tornadic-like winds. Be prepared to protect seedlings from these extremes.

Once the garden is tilled, early May is also the perfect time to directly seed many other cool weather crops. These include peas, radishes, turnips, lettuce, spinach and beets. Seeds of these crops germinate exceptionally well in cooler soils. By contrast, seeds of beans, corn, squash, cucumbers,

peppers, eggplant and melons prefer warmer soils. Delay direct planting of these seeds until the latter part of May

Whether you are a first time vegetable gardener or a seasoned vegetable gardener, I strongly recommend you read and pay close attention to the directions printed on the seed packet. The seed packet is your best source of information. It will inform you when to plant and how to plant, as well as provide information on the cultural care of the plant. One may even find the number of days required for the seeds to germinate, the number of growing days until harvest, and qualities and characteristics of the mature vegetable.

I'll finish as I started. Hooray, hooray, it's finally May; outdoor vegetable gardening starts today.