

Mother's Day has come and gone and you know what that means. No, it is not time to stop being nice to Mom, it's time to start planting those tender vegetable crops in your garden. Knowing what, when, and how to plant can offer many rewards in the long run.

Mother's Day is important for many reasons. One such reason is that it has been the holiday used as a reminder for us when our average last frost, or frost free, date is here in Central Nebraska. The average last spring freeze date indicates that half of all final spring freezes will occur before May 6 and half will occur after, based on 47 years of data from 1949-1995. Remember that this is an average and the date is just a guideline of when you can begin to plant sensitive crops. Local microclimate conditions can affect the amount of frost in the landscape. We can still have freezing temperatures after that date, so be prepared to protect sensitive plants if the temperatures begin to dip down close to the freezing mark.

The type of crop that you plant can determine when and how you put them in. Cool season crops like peas, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and kohlrabi, can handle cooler spring temperatures, along with an occasional light frost, and can be planted in the garden earlier in the year compared to warm season crops. Eggplant, pepper, and tomato are warm season crops and shouldn't be planted in the garden until after the threat of cold temperatures and frost has passed, usually around Mother's Day. Another reason to put off planting until after Mother's Day has to do with soil temperatures. After Mother's Day the soil temperatures are warming up enough that the warm season crops will begin to grow. If planted too early, the soil temperatures might not be warm enough for those warm season crops and they could just sit idle waiting for warmer soils.

How the crops go into the garden can make a difference on how successfully they grow. Some crops do better if they are transplanted, while others are better directly seeded in the garden soil. The crops that do well as transplants, started earlier indoors and planted into the garden as plants, include broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, eggplant, sweet potato, onion, tomato, and pepper. Transplanting crops will give you a head start on the growing season because the plants are already growing. Melons, cucumbers, squash, and watermelon will do okay as transplants as long as they aren't allowed to grow too big. They do best if they are planted into the garden as small plants with a few leaves. Crops that do not transplant well and are best directly seeded into the garden include beans, corn, peas, and okra.

Selecting the best vegetables to grow in the garden can be a difficult task. So many different terms to know; variety, cultivar, hybrid, heirloom... what do all of these terms mean? Variety is a naturally occurring variation of individual plants within a species. The distinguishing characteristics are reproducible in offspring, they 'come true from seed'. Cultivar comes from the term 'cultivated variety.' These plants are selected through specific hybridization, plant selection, or mutation, to achieve specific characteristics or traits. Hybrids are crosses between two species or distinct parent lines and can be developed from a series of crosses between parents. Seeds saved from hybrids usually don't 'come true from seed' meaning seeds saved and planted from hybrids won't yield the exact same fruit as the year before. Lastly there are the heirlooms. These plants are varieties that are the result of natural selection that has been in cultivation for 50 years or more. Seeds saved from heirloom varieties will 'come true from seed' and you will have the same plant as the previous year if there wasn't cross pollination. Often these plants may have the best flavor, but they often lack the disease resistance that the hybrids offer.

Mother's Day is for more than just celebrating Mom, it is also the official start to gardening season. Select the perfect method for planting the perfectly selected vegetables and start planting. Who knows, you might have something ready in time for Father's Day.

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