

Plateau Yards and Gardens: Late Winter / Early Spring Conditions and Plants

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Many growing season tasks in your gardens and landscape are best scheduled after the date of the last frost of spring in your area also known as the "frost-free date". That is May 10th in Crossville. However there are vegetable and flower species which can safely be planted as early as February, March and April because they persist despite freezing temperatures.

Residents who have moved to the county in the past two or three years may not be aware the typical winter and early spring weather pattern up here on the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee is that of a temperature roller-coaster ride. The thermometer may register balmy temperatures for a few days at a time then drop sharply down to freezing or below for three or four days. That extreme fluctuation can make life perilous for plants. Dormant plants can endure continuous cold and lots of snow safely. This winter started with a white Christmas. During January we've not had long lasting, unseasonably warm periods and have had a number of snow storms. If February and March remain consistently cold with insulating snow cover there should be less winter damage to existing plants in our landscapes than would be the case if there were extreme temperature fluctuations.

Once longer days with warmer air and soil temperatures coax plants into a growth phase shoots, blossoms and leaves will be at risk. Sudden frosts and freezes after plants have begun actively growing tend to cause damage. For tender or less than hardy plants, a shot of frosty air without protective covering or a sheltered location may be fatal. The severity of injuries caused by cold or drying winter winds depends upon how exposed (or protected) the plant is in the landscape and the nature of that particular type of flora. For example, the Star Magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*) is a slow-growing small tree that has showy white

flowers in early spring before its leaves appear. When located near a building which provides shelter from winter winds this little tree provides an excellent show most years, but if placed in the middle of a lawn as a solitary specimen the floral display will often be brief or nonexistent due to spring cold spells withering the blooms. Similarly, stone fruits such as peaches, apricots, and cherries will not be productive on the Plateau during years when freezing weather disrupts their blossom periods.

On the other hand, there are very cold-hardy plants which seem to be immune to winter damage. Some of these cool-season survivors are pernicious winter weeds that bloom early and then produce a great many weed seeds. Some of those I do battle with in my winter landscape are chickweed, deadnettle, dandelion, and hairy bittercress. On mild winter days check your yard for these pest plants. They flower and set seed very early. Hairy bittercress (*Cardamine hirsute*) plants are particularly efficient at spreading by seeds which form as early as January and February in touch-me-not pods that spray weed seeds in every direction when animals or people passing by brush against them. Weeds growing in mulch or in rock pathways away from desirable plants can be eliminated before they produce seeds by finding them early and scalding them with hot water from a tea kettle.

Pansies, violas, ornamental kale and ornamental cabbage are winter annuals typically sold at garden centers in autumn. During colder winters the kale and cabbage plants die out after a few hard freezes while pansies and violas persist looking distressed during the worst of winter weather, but growing fresh leaves and blooms during mild sunny spells. In springtime trailing pansies are sold in hanging baskets. Dianthus species and common Easter season bulbous plants are ornamentals that can withstand freezing temps outside in pots or growing in gardens.

My three favorite cool-season winter-planted vegetables are snow peas (also known as Chinese peapods or referred to by some Europeans as "mange tout" which is French for "eat all"), leaf lettuce, and potatoes. I direct seed the lettuce and peas outdoors

in raised beds and grow potatoes in containers. I grow onions and rhubarb in my small vegetable plot year round.

An excellent reference on Tennessee vegetable gardening is available for download free of charge at the University of Tennessee Extension Publications and Multimedia Catalog website. [Click Here](#) for a great publication on home garden planning, plant preparation and planting.

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W346-B.pdf>

This publication has information on both warm-season vegetables that must wait until all danger of frost is past to be set out and cool-season vegetables that can endure air temperatures below 32 degrees Fahrenheit (cold-hardiness varies by crop). Cool-season vegetables are more productive with higher quality produce when grown during spring and fall rather than during summer heat. Vegetables for early to mid-spring planting listed in table 2 on page 2 include beets (spring seed date range 3/1 to 4/15), broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower (spring transplant range 3/15 to 4/15), carrots (spring seed 3/1 to 5/1), kale, collards (spring seed 2/15 to 4/15), lettuce, leaf/head (spring seed or transplant 3/1 to 4/15), Mustard (spring seed 2/15 to 4/15), onions (spring seed or sets 3/1 to 4/15), Peas, English and snap (seed 2/15 to 4/15), Potatoes (spring seed pieces 3/1 to 4/15), Radishes (spring seed 3/1 to 4/15), spinach (spring seed 2/15 to 4/15), Swiss chard (spring seed 3/1 to 4/15), and turnips (spring seed 3/1 to 4/15).

Pages 3 through 6 in that publication provide information about selecting and purchasing seeds, and purchasing or starting transplants at home with detailed sections on materials needed to produce homegrown transplants, growing medium and fertilization, controlling temperature, maintaining the right moisture in growing media and correct lighting conditions. The final section of gives tips on seeding in the garden and transplanting seedlings in the garden.