

The Garden Plot, May 2007

By Robin Mittenthal, University Apartments Community Gardens Committee

The warm weather of May might tempt you to plant your whole garden, but there is still a risk of frost (temperatures at or below 0 C/32 F) until very late in the month. Popular crops like tomatoes, peppers, watermelons, cucumbers, and squash cannot survive frost at all, and should not be planted until at least May 20. Eggplants and watermelons need especially warm weather and should not be planted until June 1.

While you are waiting to put in these heat-loving crops, there are other things you can do in the garden. Salad greens like lettuce, spinach, mâche (corn salad), arugula, mizuna, tat soi, and bok choy will all grow well throughout May, as will radishes, turnips, beets, carrots, chard, peas, parsnips, and other cold-tolerant vegetables and herbs. All of these crops can be planted as seeds – follow the instructions on seed packages for proper planting depths and row spacings. Some of these plants will finish their life cycles within as little as 30 days and you can reuse the same space later to plant something else.

Other crops, such as cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, kohlrabi, kale, collard greens, and parsley can be planted in early May as seeds but are often planted as small plants called “starts” or “transplants.” To buy these, go to the Hilldale farmers’ market or to a garden store (see “garden centers” in the yellow pages of your phone book). These young plants will be like human teenagers – if you take good care of them, they will grow quickly into healthy, productive adults. You can grow transplants from seed in your house or apartment, but you must start before May.

Kale and collard greens are particularly nice crops because you can plant them now and harvest them from June until December. Kale is especially nutritious, and recipes using kale are readily available in cookbooks and the world wide web. Three or four kale or collard plants will probably meet the needs of a family of four.

Another good task for May is mulching. “Mulch” is a term for any material you put on the ground to keep weeds from growing and hold water in the soil. Shredded leaves work well as mulch and are available for free in Eagle Heights and University Houses Gardens. Putting as much as 20 cm (8 in) of leaves on the foot paths and any other unused space will save you a lot of work weeding later. Newspaper, cardboard, and straw can also be used as mulch.

When late May arrives, go ahead and start to plant the heat-loving crops. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant should be planted as transplants. Cucumbers and squash can be planted as seeds, but make sure you have enough space to grow them – the plants Americans call “winter squash” can grow stems, or “vines,” that are up to 8 m (25 ft) long. If you plant cucumbers next to a fence, they will grow up it. This can save you space for other crops.

Late May is also a good time to plant herbs like basil (plant as either seeds or transplants), rosemary, thyme, oregano, tarragon, and lavender (all usually planted as transplants). Flowers such as sunflowers, zinnias, and marigolds can be planted in late May as either seeds or transplants.

Next month's column will talk about some details of planting warm-season crops, as well as basic pest and weed control.

If you need more information about gardening, e-mail me at mittenth@gmail.com or visit the Eagle Heights Gardens web site at <http://www.eagleheightsgardens.org/>.

Happy gardening!