

CURE THE ITCH BY PLANTING PEAS

If you are tired of winter and hunger for spring, try planting peas as soon as the soil dries and the soil temperature reaches 40 degrees. We have several types of peas we can plant in Kansas. Probably the most common is the shelling pea and the old standard in this group is Little Marvel. Though Little Marvel is still on our recommended list, we have a number of others that do well including Green Arrow, Knight, Maestro, Burpeeana and Mr. Big. All of these are early maturing types that allow us to harvest a crop before the hot weather arrives and stops production. Snow peas are those commonly used in stir-fry that have a crisp edible pod. Recommended varieties include Dwarf Grey Sugar and Mammoth Melting Sugar. Sugar snap peas resemble shelling peas but have a thick, fleshy pod and can be eaten fresh, steamed or cooked. Like snow peas, they are not shelled but eaten pod and all. We recommend Sugar Bon, Sugar Ann, Super Sugar Snap and Sugar Sprint. Peas should be planted shallow, about one-half inch deep, to encourage rapid germination and emergence. Seed in the row should be spaced 2 inches apart. Many people often plant two rows 6 to 8 inches apart so the floppy plants can support one another. For some older varieties, this may not be enough. They may need trellising to support the growing vines. Fencing may be needed to keep rabbits away.

Soil Temperature and Vegetables

One of the most neglected tools for vegetable gardeners is a soil thermometer. Soil temperature is a much better measure of when to plant than air temperature or the calendar. Planting when soil is too cool can cause seeds to rot and transplants to sit there. A number of vegetables can germinate and grow at cool temperatures. For example, peas will germinate and grow well at a soil temperature of 40 F. Though lettuce, parsnips, and spinach can sprout at a soil temperature of 35 F, they prefer at least 45 F for best germination and growth. Radishes also do well at a soil temperature of 45 F. Warm-season crops such as tomatoes, sweet corn and beans prefer at least 55 F for germination (or transplanting), but others such as peppers, cucumbers, melons and sweet potatoes need it even warmer, about 60 F. Taking soil temperature accurately is a bit of a science. First, use a metal soil thermometer, which is sold in many garden, auto parts and hardware stores. Take temperature 2.5 inches deep at about 10 to 11 a.m. Temperature variations throughout the day and night affect soil temperature, with lowest readings after dawn and warmest around mid-afternoon. The late-morning reading gives a good average temperature. If taking the soil temperature at this time is not practical, take a reading before you leave for work and a second when you return home and use the average. Also be sure to get a consistent reading for four to five days in a row before planting, and make sure a cold snap is not predicted.

Pruning Deciduous Shrubs

Gardeners are eager to get out and do something in the landscape this time of year. One chore that can be taken care of now is pruning certain shrubs. Often, gardeners approach pruning with trepidation, but it is not as difficult as it may seem. Remember, not all shrubs need to be pruned (i.e., witch hazel), and certain shrubs, which will be identified later, should not be pruned this time of year. Shrubs are pruned to maintain or reduce size, rejuvenate growth, or to remove diseased, dead or damaged branches. Deciduous shrubs are those that lose their leaves each winter. Evergreen shrubs maintain foliage all year and include yews and junipers.

Deciduous shrubs are placed into three groups:

- Those that flower in the spring on wood produced last year;
- Those that flower later in the year on current seasons' growth; and
- Those that may produce flowers, but those flowers are of little ornamental value.

Shrubs that flower in the spring should not be pruned until immediately after flowering. Though pruning earlier will not harm the health of the plant, the flowering display will be reduced. Examples of these types of plants include forsythia, lilac and mock orange. Shrubs that bloom on current seasons' growth or that do not produce ornamental flowers are best pruned in late winter to early spring. Examples include Rose-of-Sharon, pyracantha, Bumald spirea and Japanese spirea. Pruning during the spring allows wounds to heal quickly without threat from insects or disease. There is no need to treat pruning cuts with paints or sealers. In fact, some of these products may retard healing. There are three basic methods used in pruning shrubs: thinning, heading back and rejuvenating. Thinning is used to thin out branches from a shrub that is too dense. It is accomplished by removing most of the inward growing twigs by either cutting them back to a larger branch or cutting them back to just above an outward-facing bud. On multi-stemmed shrubs, the oldest canes may be completely removed. Heading back is done by removing the end of a branch by cutting it back to a bud and is used for either reducing height or keeping a shrub compact. Branches are not cut back to a uniform height because this results in a "witches-broom" effect. Rejuvenation is the most severe type of pruning and may be used on multi-stem shrubs that have become too large, with too many old branches to justify saving the younger canes. All stems are cut back to 3- to 5-inch stubs. This is not recommended for all shrubs but does work well for spirea, forsythia, pyracantha, ninebark, Russian almond, little leaf mock orange, shrub roses and flowering quince.

Leaching Houseplants

Everyone knows that someone stranded in the ocean should not drink the water. The salt content of that water will make a bad situation worse. What many people don't realize is that this same principle can harm plants. Fertilizers are salts. They must be salts in order for the plant roots to take them up. However, salt levels can build up over time and eventually may harm plant roots leading to scorched leaves and unhealthy plants. Though this can happen under field conditions, like in low rainfall areas, it's particularly critical with houseplants. Houseplants have a certain soil volume that doesn't change until a plant is repotted. Salt build-up can be a crucial concern especially if plants are fertilized heavily. Leaching an overabundance of salts can be an important practice to ensure the health of our houseplants. Leaching is not a complicated or difficult process. It consists of adding enough water to wash out excess salts. How much water is enough? Add the amount of water that would equal twice the volume of the pot. This, of course, would need to be done outside or in a bathtub or sink. Water must be added slowly so that it doesn't overflow the rim of the pot. If salt has formed a crust on the surface of the soil, remove it but don't take more than 1/4 inch of the underlying media.

Forcing Stems of Woody Plants for Indoor Bloom

Stems of a number of woody plants can be forced into bloom for indoor display. Of course, some are easier to force than others. Three of the easiest are forsythia, pussywillow, and flowering quince. These plants have now gone through enough cold weather to satisfy their chilling requirement and should bloom if given the right conditions. Remember that the flower buds on forsythia are killed as temperatures reach -10 degrees F. If your area has had temperatures this far below zero, use one of the other woody plants. Choose a day that is above freezing for collecting branches for blooming. Keep the stem length to 3 feet or less. As you cut, place the stems in a bucket of water. Once you have the number of branches you want, bring them into the house and soak them in warm water for several hours -- a bathtub works well for this. This ensures that the stems and buds are fully hydrated. Next, place them in a container that has a warm, preservative solution and place them in an environment with high humidity and plenty of light. Make your preservative solution by dissolving packets of floral preservative in water. These packets can often be obtained from your local florist. You can also make your own preservative by adding a tablespoon of Listerine per gallon of water, but commercial preservatives are preferred. Floral preservatives accomplish two functions; they prevent bacterial growth in your water and provide nutrients and energy for the life processes of the plants.

Many times our houses have a very low relative humidity during the winter. These low humidities can lead to dehydration of flower buds and blossoms. To raise the humidity around your plants, mist the plants or drape a dry cleaner's bag over your stems. If a cleaner's bag is too small, use a painter's clear plastic drop cloth. Humidifiers can also help raise humidity levels.

Normally, forsythia will take about nine days to flower, quince will require between 12 to 20, and pussywillow needs from five to 15 days. The time required will vary depending on indoor conditions and how late in the winter the branches were collected. Most woody plants should be in flower within three weeks of collection and will remain in flower for about a week before blooms start to fade.