

Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Office
206 N. Griffith, Suite A
El Dorado, Kansas 67042

THE GRAPEVINE



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Larry Crouse

Extension Horticulture Agent

TIME TO PLANT POTATOES APPROACHING

St. Patrick's Day is just around the corner, so it is time to think about getting seed potatoes in the ground. Actually any time from mid- to late-March is fine for potato planting. We may have to plant later this year than normal due to cold, wet soils. Be sure to buy seed potatoes rather than using those bought for cooking. Seed potatoes are certified disease free and have plenty of starch to sprout as quickly as soil temperatures allow. Most seed potatoes can be cut into four pieces, though large potatoes may yield more, and small less. Each seed piece should be between 1.5 and 2 ounces. Seed pieces this size will have more than one eye. Each pound of potatoes should yield 8 to 10 seed pieces. Cut the seed 2 to 3 days before planting so freshly cut surfaces have a chance to suberize, or toughen, and form a protective coating. Storing seed in a warm location during suberization will speed the process. Plant each seed piece about 1 to 2 inches deep and 8 to 12 inches apart in rows. Though it is important to plant potatoes in March, emergence is slow. It is often mid- to late-April before new plants poke their way through the soil. As the potatoes grow, pull soil up to the base of the plants. New potatoes are borne above the planted seed piece, and it is important to keep sunlight from hitting the new potatoes. Exposed potatoes will turn green and produce a poisonous substance called solanine. Keeping the potatoes covered will prevent this.

Bolting and Buttoning in Cole Crop Plants

Broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower are cole crops that have a tendency to bolt (go to seed) or button (produce an extremely small head) if plants are not grown properly. These crops need to be kept actively growing through their production cycle, including growing transplants from seed. If they slow down due to under-fertilization or are stunted due to overgrowing their container, buttoning or bolting is more likely. Therefore, be sure to properly fertilize plants grown from seed and ensure they have enough light. The easiest way to fertilize transplants is to use a potting soil with fertilizer already added. Light may be more of a challenge. Often natural sunlight is not sufficient unless the plants are in a greenhouse. Therefore, additional light is often needed. If you are not growing your own transplants but rather selecting plants later in the month for transplanting, choose small, stocky, dark green plants. Even after transplanting, these plants need to be well-fertilized. Fertilize at transplanting with a starter solution and continue to fertilize every 2 to 3 weeks until harvest. Both buttoning and bolting are irreversible. Once a seed stalk starts to form, nothing can be done to force the plant to produce a normal crop.

Use Wide Rows for Certain Vegetables

Lettuce, radishes and spinach are planted early enough that weeds are usually not a problem. Though these plants can usually be planted starting in mid-March, planting may need to be delayed due to cold, wet soils this year. Usually, we can plant as late as mid-April for these plants. If space is at a premium, gardeners can plant a wide row and get more production out of a small space. How wide? Usually 12 to 18 inches is about right. Leaving aisles between wide rows allows for convenient harvesting. Seed can be planted in several rows close together to make a wide row but it is easier to scatter seeds uniformly over the area. After seeding, tamp down the row lightly with the back of a hoe to eliminate air pockets. Then pull soil from the sides of the row with the back of a garden rake to cover the seed. One-quarter inch of soil over the seed should be good. Be careful to not sow too densely as too much competition can stunt plants. Space seed according to the instructions on the seed packet. If you do happen to sow too thickly, plants can be thinned later. It is best to go back to a single row for later planted crops to allow for easier weed control.

Cut Back Ornamental Grasses

March is a good time to remove dead foliage from ornamental grasses. Grasses green up earlier if foliage is removed and are more attractive without a mixture of dead and live leaves. A number of tools can be used including hand clippers, weed whips (if the foliage is of a small enough diameter), weed whips with a circular blade, or even a chain saw. Use the top of the chainsaw bar to cut so the saw doesn't pull in debris and clog. Also, it is often helpful to tie foliage together before cutting so it doesn't interfere and is easier to dispose of. Burning is another option - but only if it is safe and legal to do so. Note that these grasses may not burn long, but they burn extremely hot. Even so, the crown of the plant is not damaged and new growth appears relatively quickly. If the center of the clump shows little growth, the plant would benefit from division. Dig up the entire clump and separate. Then replant the vigorous growth found on the outer edge of the clump.

Don't Work Wet Soil

Resist the temptation to work any soil if it is wet. Doing so destroys the structure of the soil resulting in clods that may not break down all summer. To determine if a soil is too wet to work, grab a handful and squeeze. If water comes out, it is much too wet. Even if no water drips out, it still may not be dry enough to work. Push a finger into the soil you squeezed. If it crumbles, it is dry enough, but if your finger just leaves an indentation, more time is needed. Be sure to take your handfuls of soil from the depth you plan to work the soil because deeper soils may contain more moisture than the surface. If there is a small area that you wish to plant in a few weeks and it much too wet to work, try tarping the area during wet weather and uncovering when it is dry. This will allow the soil to dry enough to work by the time you are ready to plant.

LANDSCAPING PROGRAM - There's still time to register!

On Thursday, March 21st, at 6:30 PM there will be a presentation by Travis Carmichael, the Lyon County K-State Research & Extension Horticulture Agent on Residential Landscaping. This program will cover the do's and don'ts of landscaping your home. Travis will share information concerning plant selection and placement and discuss the major components of landscape design such as continuity, theme, unity, and more. Find out the mistakes and pitfalls to avoid when you make those decisions for your home. To register for this program call the Butler County Extension office at (316) 321-9660 by Tuesday, March 19th to register for his presentation. There is a \$5 fee for this program.

Fruit Tree Pruning Workshop Right Around the Corner!

On Friday, March 22nd, at 10:00 AM there will be a demonstration and workshop on pruning fruit trees in El Dorado, KS. Larry Crouse, the Butler County K-State Research & Extension Agent will lead Butler County Master Gardeners, and any others who want to participate, through a demonstration on pruning apple trees. Then all participants will have an opportunity to prune a tree to ensure they understand the principles behind pruning for fruit production. Please dress appropriately and bring gloves and pruning implements. No registration is required for this event, just show up with a desire to learn and help!

Larry E. Crouse
Butler County Horticulture Agent
K-State Research & Extension
206 N Griffith, Suite A
El Dorado, KS 67042
(316)321-9660
lcrouse@ksu.edu