Video of the Week: Peas, Easy to Grow

VEGETABLES

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 just 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 and hardware stores. Take temperature 2.5 inches deep at about 10 to 11 a.m. Diurnal variations affect soil temperature, with lowest readings after dawn and warmest around mid-afternoon. The late-morning reading gives a good average temperature. Also be sure to get a consistent reading for 4 to 5 days in a row before planting, and make sure a cold snap is not predicted.

An excellent guide sheet on this subject is published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and is titled “Soil Temperature Conditions for Vegetable Seed Germination.” It can be found at http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1061/ANR-1061.pdf (WU)
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, Mammoth Melting Sugar and Snow Green. 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. (WU)

FRUIT

Growing Blueberries

Though blueberries are not native to Kansas, we can grow them at least in the eastern half of the state. However, just because we can grow them doesn’t mean they are easy. The key is good preparation. Blueberries are related to azaleas and rhododendrons and therefore require an acid pH (between 4.8 to 5.2 is best) and do not have root hairs. The lack of root hairs means we must do a good job of watering, and mulching is very important.

It is best to start a year ahead of time to allow for pH adjustment, weed control and the addition of organic matter. The first step is always a soil test so that you know how much the pH needs to be dropped. For a pH up to 5.5, the addition of sphagnum peat moss at the rate of 2 cubic feet per 100 square feet will be adequate. For a pH 5.5 to 6.0, add one pound of sulfur per 100 square feet
of bed in addition to the peat moss. For a pH 6.0 to 6.5, add 1.5 lbs. sulfur per 100 square feet of bed. For pH levels above 6.5, use 2 lbs. sulfur per 100 square feet of bed and double the amount of sphagnum peat moss suggested earlier. Do not use aluminum sulfate to correct a high pH as excessive levels of aluminum can be toxic to blueberries. For each 0.5 movement up the pH scale from 6.5, add an additional pound of sulfur. Sulfur can be applied as a dust, but the pelletized sulfur is much easier to spread. Only the row should be treated and the row width should be 5 feet. Blueberries are normally spaced about 5 feet within the row. Sulfur takes time to react and so this should be done so that there is as much time as possible between applying sulfur and planting.

Blueberries will bear more if you have more than one variety. Recommended varieties vary but you may want to try Bluecrop as it is very adaptable. Patriot also seems to do well. You may want to try some other varieties depending on the descriptions you read.

Blueberries should be mulched. Sawdust is the traditional material but straw and wood chips can be used to good effect. Mulch to a depth of about 3 inches.

Irrigation is also a must. Soils should be kept moist but never waterlogged. Adding peat moss to the planting row will elevate the planting bed enough that standing water should not be an issue. However, an elevated bed will dry out more quickly, so there must be a way to add water. Trickle irrigation works well for blueberries. Try watering twice a week during the summer with enough water to wet the soil 8 inches deep. Watering once a week may be enough during the cooler weather of spring and fall.

As you can guess, there is more to growing blueberries than can be included in a short article. Dr. Art Gaus from the University of Missouri shared with me an instruction sheet on how to grow blueberries more than 20 years ago. It is still excellent information on blueberry culture. You can access it by going to: http://www.hfrr.ksu.edu/doc3091.ashx (WU)

**ORNAMENTALS**

**Messy Fruit on Ornamental Pears**

Many homeowners had ornamental pears that produced fruit last year. Though this fruit is small (about the size of a marble), it is very messy. Therefore people want to know why trees fruited last year and will the same thing happen this year.

Ornamental pears normally bloom very early in the season. So early that late spring frosts usually kill the pear fruit. Last year, that didn’t happen. Our last frost came before these trees bloomed. Therefore, fruit developed, matured and eventually made a mess.
What are the chances it will happen again this year? Though it is possible, it isn’t likely. Kansas is known for late spring frosts. Therefore we suggest homeowners let nature take its course. However, if you wish to prevent fruit formation regardless of the weather, you can try a product called Florel. It is applied at full bloom and will kill the small, developing fruit. We have had mixed results with Florel in trials done in Wichita. At times it has worked very well and at other times not well at all. Again, we believe the chances of messy fruit on ornamental pears this year is quite small even if you do nothing. (WU)

**MISCELLANEOUS**

**Record Low Temperatures**

Areas of Kansas set record low temperatures last week. Bob Neier, K-State Research and Extension Horticulture Agent in Sedgwick County reported that Wichita hit -17°F early Thursday morning. This was the 4th coldest temperature ever recorded in Wichita, the coldest in 29 years and the second coldest night in 106 years. Wichita is in cold hardiness Zone 6 (0 to -10°F). A temperature of -17°F is a “Zone 5” temperature (-10 to -20°F). Therefore, we will see plant damage. For example, crapemyrtles will have top growth killed but the plant should survive and send up new growth this spring. Also, flower buds on forsythia are normally killed when temperatures dip below -10°F. Fortunately, Wichita had a 6-inch snow cover, which will help lessen plant injury.

We had an article two weeks ago discussing cold damage to fruit crops. Portions are reproduced below as a reminder.

“Peach trees often have fruit bud damage when temperatures reach 5 to 10 degrees below zero. The tree will be fine as the leaf buds are undamaged. Note that damage to fruit buds is progressive. In other words, a temperature of minus 10 for a short period will cause less damage than a sustained reading of 10 below zero. Also, the buds will show progressively more damage the further below minus 10 degrees the temperature reaches.

Blackberries also can be damaged at 5 to 10 degrees below zero but this is variety dependent as some of the newer thornless varieties are harder. With blackberries, we are not worried about the fruit buds but the fruiting canes. Cold temperatures can kill all aboveground growth. However, the plant will survive and grow new canes from the crown that will fruit next year.

Apples are hardier, and fruit buds are usually not damaged unless the temperature reaches minus 20 to minus 25 degrees. Red Delicious is one of our most tender varieties and can be damaged when temperatures reach minus 15.” (WU)
Don’t Work Soil Too Wet

We have gone from very dry conditions earlier in the winter to many areas being quite moist due to winter storms. 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 tree planting is in your future, you may want to work the soil as soon as it is dry enough to work. You may then protect that area from becoming too wet by covering with a tarp if rain is forecast near the planting date. (WU)

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