

Column: Late winter, early spring gardening challenges

April 13, 2023



Last frost dates vary from location to location, but at higher elevations, the last frost date may be into May. This doesn't say we can't get one later. Nor does it say that temperatures will start warming up enough so that we can plant tomatoes and peppers. But it does indicate that transplanting tender vegetable can begin (with a little cold protection provided as needed) as soon as the soils can be worked.

Seedcorn maggot

The seedcorn maggot can be a real problem with bean, corn, and squash family seeds.

You will almost never see the fly but may, if you dig into the seed row in time, may see the white maggots. By the time the gardener realizes that something is wrong and looks in the seed furrow, the damage is already done.

The maggot and seed alike may have disappeared. Some recent experiments in the Midwest demonstrated that soil temperatures played a major role in the degree of damage. -

At soil temperatures below 64 degrees, seed destruction increased significantly. It will pay the gardener to wait until the soil is well-warmed to plant these crops or to warm the soil with clear plastic for three to five days before planting and to keep the plastic in place if conditions are overcast until the seeds start to emerge. A soil thermometer can be a useful investment.

Why are crows sometimes seen chasing owls during daylight hours? A roosting crow is quite vulnerable to night predation by owls, so crows certainly view them with a jaundiced eye. When an owl is flushed from its

roost during daylight hours, the crows see it as a threat and gang up to scare it away. The owl is no good at aerial combat and so will flee the irritated crows.

This may sound obvious, but don't buy bedding plants that have wilted and been revived. How do you know if your particular flat has wilted? You don't. But if you see others wilted, it is a reasonable assumption that overall care and maintenance is not up to snuff. Wilted plants will never perform as well as ones that have not had their growth checked.

Will cover crops put nitrogen back into the soil?

Without a doubt, the answer is yes. However, much of the nitrogen from cover crops turned under in the spring may not be available to the garden until mid-summer. Thus, the gardener will have to supply enough nitrogen in an available form to get the vegetables and flowers off to a good start. I probably don't have to remind you that nitrogen deficiencies are the most common nutrient issue that I see in home gardens.

Some gardeners and farmers are experimenting with alyssum as a summer cover crop for certain transplanted vegetables, especially cabbage family plants like broccoli. The alyssum isn't extremely competitive, and it is very attractive to predatory insects ("beneficials") that may help to control aphids and other insect pests. In addition, it may help to reduce weed growth.

Important Notes

Food Preservation: You can get up-to-date and accurate answers to your food preservation questions by calling our office at 503 397-3462 and ask to speak to Jenny Rudolph.

Garden Donations: Donate extra garden produce and/or money to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. The donations always are greatly appreciated.

Have Questions?

If you have questions on any of these topics or other questions, please contact Chip Bubl, Oregon State University Extension office in St. Helens at 503-397-3462 or at chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu. The office is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

To contact the OSU Extension Service in Curry County, call 541-247-6672.