

HOME FRONT

*"You know how it is
with an April day
When the sun is out
and the wind is still,
You're one month on
in the middle of May.
But if you so much as
dare to speak,
A cloud comes over
the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a
frozen peak,
And you're two
months back in the
middle of March."*

From "Two Tramps In Mud Time"
by Robert Frost



AgriVentures Agway employee Patty Babcock checks a delivery of spring shrubs and plants — some that prefer full sun, some that prefer shade — Wednesday at the Agway store on Mill Plain Road in Danbury.

Getting ready to grow

Now's the time of year to plan and be patient with your garden

By Robert Miller
STAFF WRITER

Right now, Vicki Yolen is fighting the urge to get really dirty.

She's cleaning the leaf litter from last year's gardens, sharpening her tools, and taking an inventory of her tomato frames.

But planting or even tilling the soil? That has to wait.

"I'm chomping at the bit," said Yolen, a Ridgefield resident who is a graduate of the master gardener program run by the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System.

"There's a lot of things to do to clean up and cut back in the garden, but I do get antsy" to plant, she said.

For after a stretch of lovely weather, like the one that came in the third week of March, it's easy for novice gardeners to think it's time to take a newly honed trowel, dig a hole and stick a plant into the ground.

But wait for another week or two, experts say. We can still get a serious frost, not to mention snow.

"This is New England," Yolen said. "It's always safe to wait," said Sandy Wilson, master gardener program coordinator for Fairfield County, working in the cooperative extension system office in Bethel.

It's the advent season for gardeners right now — the weeks of preparation for a pastime that's growing increasingly popular, especially planting vegetables.

That's due to a combination of factors: an economy that makes it cheaper to grow your own tomatoes and peppers; a local food movement that stresses the environmental advantages of having a home garden; and the delight of actually tasting something really, really fresh.

"It's a matter of necessity," said Edith Meffley, who until this year had been the longtime coordinator of the Ridgefield community garden program.

Meffley said all 27 plots in the community garden are now reserved, and the town is looking for a location for a second set of beds.



Employee Rosemarie Gottenberg adds pansies to a container garden with grasses for display at Hollandia Nursery in Bethel.

But waiting has its advantages, especially for people planning a garden for the first time. Every good plot needs planning.

The main thing to think about is where it should go.

"Location, location, location," said David O'Leary, who owns the Agway outlets in Danbury, New Milford and Torrington, and who is now training his staff to help customers who ask garden questions.

If it's going to be a vegetable garden, a shady nook won't do.

"You want a vegetable garden to get at least six hours of sun a day," said Corinne Flokos, nursery manager at Lexington Gardens in Newtown. "All-day sun is better."

Flower gardens can handle more shade, Flokos said, in part, because some flower species — whether perennials or annuals — can handle more shade. That may mean sacrificing some grand effects, however.

"Most people want showy flowers," Yolen said. "That means more sun."

Once you find a good spot, many gardening experts advise getting a soil



Employee Carolyn Oggeri pinches container after container of tiny vinca plants to make them grow fuller in a greenhouse at Lexington Gardens in Newtown.

Photography by Michael Duffy

test. It will tell you whether your soil is acid, alkaline or neutral, and whether you need to correct that balance.

After testing, you can till the soil or at the least turn it over with a shovel. That loosens the soil and makes it easier for plants to establish roots.

But again, you shouldn't do it while the ground is still sodden. It's better to wait until it's warm and dry.

"We want it to be friable," Wilson, of the Cooperative Extension System, said. "When you squeeze it, water shouldn't come out. We say it should have the consistency of chocolate cake crumbs."

You can also work in compost, which adds nutrients, microorganisms and substance to the soil.

"Compost is this cure-all," Wilson said. Eventually, you can start planting. Mid-April is a good time.

"You can start planting cold crops — peas, lettuce, cabbage, cauliflower," said Eugene Reelick, owner of Hollandia Nurseries in Bethel.

Reelick said perennial flowers, trees, shrubs and small fruit bushes (like blueberries, raspberries and cur-

rants) can handle being planted earlier. So can some herbs.

But after that, patience is again a virtue. The rest of the garden plants — annual flowers and cold-sensitive vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, squash and beans — need warm weather to do well. A frost will kill them. So wait until mid-May, or even late May, before you put them in the ground.

And then get ready for some pleasant hours of weeding, mulching, coaxing and, with luck, harvesting. And pray that the weather gods are kind. Last summer — rainy, drizzly cool and blight-ridden — was not good.

"We had so many people who were interested in planting a garden last year," Wilson said. "I felt really bad for them. It was a terrible garden year."

But gardening also teaches hope. Last year was last year. And even bad years have triumphs.

"You can have a bad year for tomatoes and a great year for broccoli," Ridgefield gardener Yolen said. "And what tastes better than something you've grown yourself? Even when it doesn't really, it does."

The basic steps to getting your garden going

■ If it's an established garden, start cleaning way litter and debris from the previous year.

■ If it's a new garden, think about where it's going and what plants you want in it. Vegetable gardens need at least six to eight hours of sunlight a day to be successful. Flower gardens need less.

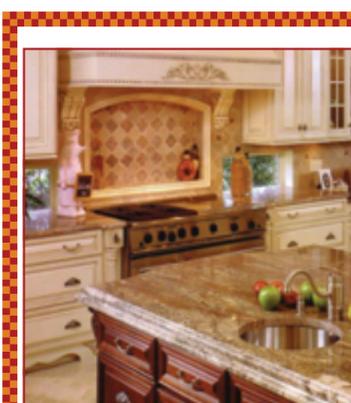
■ Get a soil test for acid-alkaline balance. Both the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Service at 860-486-4274 and the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven at 203-974-8521 offer these tests.

■ Wait until the soil is dry before you Rototill it. Working soil when it's cold and wet will just create clumps.

■ When you do till the soil, or turn it over with a shovel, loosen it to a depth of at least six to eight inches.

■ While you can plant perennial flowers, trees and bushes by mid-April, along with cold crops — peas, lettuce, some herbs — hold off on planting warm-weather vegetables until mid- to late May.

■ The Connecticut Master Gardeners program runs a gardeners' hotline at 203-207-3267 if you need guidance.



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