

## Don't Let Early Warmup Trick You into Early Planting

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The weather this month has been warmer than normal. No surprise there: according to NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), February 2016 was the warmest February we've had in the 137 years they've been keeping records (<http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/201602>).

This unusually warm weather has caused a lot of early growth in our yards. Trees and shrubs are budding out a bit earlier than usual, as have spring-flowering bulbs. Lawns are already growing and needing to be mowed. In fact, based on the fact that crabgrass germinates at about the time that forsythia blooms, we're already a couple of weeks late getting our pre-emergence herbicides applied.

What concerns me is the urge to start planting flowers and vegetables earlier than normal, because it's mighty hard to resist getting out in the garden when the weather is in the 70s. But I need to ask that you try to resist the siren call of the garden for at least another few weeks, because Mother Nature (and winter) are not through with us yet.

Midwestern weather is nothing if not unpredictable. The warm spell we enjoy one week can easily be followed by frost and flurries the next. You only have to go back to 2007 to see how damaging this can be. This was the year we spent most of March in the 80s, breaking several temperature records, only to drop to record lows in 36 hours during Easter weekend. Many gardeners lost everything they planted.

Purdue offers a free publication entitled the "Indiana Vegetable Planting Calendar." This bulletin lists the earliest safe planting dates for most vegetables, based on average dates for the last frost of the spring. As with all "averages," some years our last frost of the year will be earlier than the average date, and some years it will be later. Since what the weather is doing today is no indication of what the weather will be like a month from now, following these recommendations is the best way to play it safe, and not have to replant your garden following a killing freeze.

The recommended planting dates vary by region and by the cold-hardiness of the crop. For the Evansville area, we can normally plant cool-weather plants, such as broccoli, lettuce, and potatoes between March 10 and April 1. Warm-season vegetables, like tomatoes, squash, and okra, should not be planted before April 20.

Even if we don't get a killing freeze, a period of cold weather can harm warm-season vegetables and flowers. They will stop growing, and will remain stunted for most of the rest of the season. Their roots also don't grow well in cold soil, so when hot and dry weather does come, the plants won't be able to take up enough water to survive.

To get a copy of the Indiana Vegetable Planting Calendar, send me an email, or call the Extension office at (812) 435-5287.