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The Vine Line

Spring Planting Time



Since moving to Memphis in the mid-eighties I have been told by older gardeners that our last average frost date is April 15th. This year it hit it exactly on April 15th with a low of 31 degrees. We have always based the date of our spring plant sale on that bit of local wisdom and on several occasions have had a frost within that week.

Of course you can plant most trees and shrubs really anytime the ground is dry enough to work in the winter and perennials can be planted long before the last frost date as well. Especially ones that you dig and divide in your home garden or share with friends and neighbors. Hardy vegetables like cabbage, lettuce, onions, potatoes and peas must be planted early also or you won't get a crop.

What mostly is of concern regarding the last frost are plants that have been grown in greenhouses and not been hardened off to outdoor weather conditions. The big box stores are really big on tempting gardeners with both annuals and tender vegetables, long before it is advisable to plant them.

Most annuals such as Petunias, Marigolds, Zinnias, Celosia, Lantana and a host of others can be planted now without worry.

Real heat lovers like Caladiums, Impatiens, Vinca, Tropical Hibiscus and vegetables such as Tomatoes, Peppers, Eggplant, Sweet Potatoes and Basil benefit from soil that is warm to the touch and night temperatures that are above 50 degrees. Plant them too early and they won't freeze but may be stunted and never perform as they should. With this group of plants, good advice is to go ahead and purchase them when available, but leave them in their pots in a sunny place near the garage or somewhere where you can bring them in for the night if the temperature dips. Usually by May 1st it is safe to plant all of these.

Being a good gardener involves a lot of experience and the best way to acquire that, is to get your hands dirty, follow the advice of successful gardeners and pay attention to the

local weather forecast!

Happy planting,



MBG Director of Horticulture

Fleeting Beauty: Spring Ephemeral Wildflowers

There couldn't be a prettier time of year to be outside. The sun is shining, birds are singing, a warm breeze is blowing, and spring ephemeral wildflowers are in bloom! Eastern North America is home to an incredibly wide variety of wildflowers, and some of the most treasured are the ephemeral "blink and you may miss them" species.

Ephemeral is an adjective meaning "lasting for a short time; fleeting". These species grow in the rich soil of our eastern forests, under a canopy of trees. In early spring as soils begin to warm and daylight lengthens, these plants burst forth from their winter slumber, using energy stored the year before to push leaves up through the leaf layer of the forest floor. They are eager to bloom, set seed, and store up energy for next year, all before the trees leaf out completely and block all that precious sunlight. Once the canopy has filled in and the temperatures have risen, the above ground portion of ephemeral plants will die back to the ground. They will lie dormant through the hot summer, all but forgotten under the leafy cover of oaks and hickories, until next spring when their time to shine begins anew.

Spring ephemerals come in a stunning variety of shapes and colors. They begin the season with the early-season cutleaf toothwort, *Cardamine concatenata*, notable for its spray of small white flowers, and its finely cut foliage with toothlike projections on its leaves. Mayapples, *Podophyllum peltatum*, also bear white flowers, large nodding blooms carried under their umbrella-shaped leaves. These earliest bloomers are followed by Virginia bluebells, *Mertensia virginica*, a big-leafed beauty with pink buds that open into baby blue, bell-shaped flowers.



Several red-blooming Trillium species also bloom now. Trilliums are often known as "wake-robins", since they bloom just as robins and other songbirds are waking from the winter.

Jack-in-the-pulpit, *Arisaema triphyllum*, has cup-shaped, elaborately hooded green flowers streaked with white or purple. Yellow trout lilies, *Erythronium americanum*, one of the better-known ephemerals, sport lovely yellow blooms, and are named for their attractive purple and green mottled leaves, which look remarkably like the backs of trout swimming in a sun-dappled stream.

The stalks of *Sanguinaria canadensis* each bear a single round leaf and a single daisy-like white flower. Broken stems and roots will drip bright red juice, which earned it the common name "bloodroot". Bloodroot juice was used as a dye and an insect repellent by native Americans. Blooming towards the end of the spring ephemeral season are celandine

poppies, also known as yellow wood poppies, *Stylophorum diphyllum*, with buttery yellow flowers held over deeply lobed, slightly fuzzy leaves.

While the flowers of ephemerals are fleeting, the individual plants are usually quite long-lived, as well as slow-growing. It can take years for a plant to store up enough energy to bloom. Trout lilies, for instance, can take up to eight years (or more!) to bloom. That is why it is so important not to pick ephemeral wildflowers. A picked bloom will not be able to set seeds, and it may take the plant years to collect enough energy to bloom again. Without seeds, these plants cannot reproduce. If you'd like to add these species to your own garden (and many of them do make wonderful garden plants), purchase nursery-grown plants, and leave the ones in the wild in their spot. There, they will continue to share their fleeting beauty in the spring for generations to come.

By Jill Maybry, MBG Butterfly & Delta Heritage Gardens Curator

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