

# Starting An Early Spring Garden

David Ronniger

Now is the time to explain the farmer's mindset on how to begin your early spring garden here in the northern Rockies, where there can still be snow on the ground into May.

It starts by making sure you have all the seeds you need to grow the food that you and your family wish to eat with enough left over to share with your friends. Seed catalogs usually find their way into our mailboxes, but here are some interesting seed companies with heirloom and open pollinated seeds whose catalogs are easily available:

**High Mowing Seeds**  
(802) 472-6174 (Vermont)

**Johnny's Seeds**  
(877) 564-6697 (Maine)

**Territorial Seeds**  
(800) 626-0866 (Oregon)

**Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds**  
(417) 924-8917 (Missouri)

**D.V. Burrell Seed Company**  
(719) 254-3318 (Colorado)

Once you have your seeds, what's first? Well, celery has been my first for many years and it's a good idea to plant it in late February or in the first half of March, as it is slow to germinate and slow to grow at first in this northern climate. So, a small flat is all one needs to get started for a small home garden that only needs a few heads of celery. Next comes parsley that can also be planted in the first box on a window sill or using a lighted seed-starting apparatus.

Now, I love shallots (in the onion family) and you can grow larger bulbs from seed than from sets. It's time for them in mid-March as they will be ready to line out in the garden in mid-April to mid-May, as they thrive in warmer soil.

Onions...well, Ma always said to plant onions and peas as soon as you can get into some dry soil

as they both like the cooler days and nights. In this northern garden, onions and leeks are best planted from transplants rather than dry sets. Onion transplants are available from Dixondale Farms at 877-367-1015 (Texas), or your local garden center. (If they don't have them, suggest they get some!)

Now we are in the middle of March to April and

it is time to start the first planting of lettuces, winter and summer squash, melons, tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers in the greenhouse or on the window sill. Once the weather warms enough, some of the earlier vegetables can continue in a cold frame, which is a miniature greenhouse on the ground facing the southern sun. These little helpers are great for hardening off the plants, making them hardy. They need to be closed at night to protect against frost, yet propped open each day to let the warm air vent and prevent the sun from overheating the frame and cooking your seedlings! These cold

frames are also great for protecting against our Montana winds.

As April is approaching and it is time to transplant out the first seedlings of lettuces and greens like Swiss chard, kale, collards, radishes, spinach, green onions, scallions and any other domestic or asian greens. April is also the time for beets and turnips and (between April 1st and 15th) to plant cabbage, broccoli, kohlrabi, cauliflower by seed, in the house or greenhouse, so they can then be trans-



planted out in the garden. This should be done around the first of June for late cabbage and in mid-May for the rest of the Cruciferous family. Then onion and leek transplanting happens.

You can see that there are many things to consider and stay up with in the procession of planting and transplanting. Mind you, it's a challenge, but a fun and interesting hobby growing your own food to eat!

By mid-April, it's time for direct seeding of carrots, parsnips and rutabagas. Heading toward May, the weather is warming up, so look back and you will see some early weeds sprouting. This is the time to take a few minutes and hoe them down. Get them while they are just sprouting and it will save time later.

As we get into May, it's time to think about what Ma also said; that is, to plant potatoes and corn last, in mid-May to June. And remember Grandma's old wives' tale about planting things that grow above the ground in the light of the moon, and those that grow below the ground in the dark of the moon. If you want big potatoes and many ears of corn, look up before you plant!

June is here and a fine time to finish the transplanting of the second planting of lettuces and cabbages for fall storage; also your broccoli, cauliflower and kohlrabi. And now it's time to turn around and hoe the little weeds again. Mulch the garden as it will save you a lot of time and hold the moisture in the soil. Boy, what a fun hobby it is to see the seeds emerge and set their leaves, and to see the fruits of your labors!

Now, as July approaches, you should be well caught up with everything. In the middle of July,

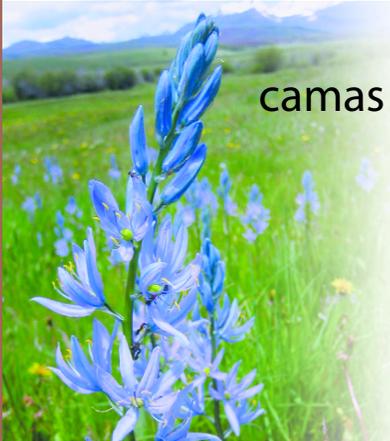
you can plant some of the fall crops like rutabagas and black radishes, another transplanting of lettuces, and spinach if you have a shady corner. You can also plant fall kale and collards. The rest is up to you as to how your garden is planted. But leave some space for planting garlic. It is best planted in early September and garlic is an 11-month crop in this north country.

Enjoy your garden as its own reward, especially if you have young children who will be so amazed at what a tiny seed will bring forth. I think the peas are the most fun for them, especially at picking time. ■ —Happy Gardening!



*David Ronniger began at the age of 23 helping propel the organic gardening and farming movements, which today are huge industries. He built Salt Lake's first natural food store in 1970, then left it for his brother and sister to*

*tend. He set out for the north country with a dream of gardening and farming. He settled in Moyie Springs, Idaho, where he introduced several new varieties of seed potatoes to home gardeners, small farmers, stores and restaurants. After 34 years there, David now "lives the legend" in Hot Springs, MT, where he opened Camas Natural Foods & Bakery. He shares his knowledge of farming and gardening with young and old. He spends his free time soaking in the healing waters of this quaint village in the foothills above Flathead Lake. Question about gardening? David would love to hear from you! Call 406-741-2148.*



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