



There's nothing like a breath of spring to start the gardening questions rolling in. Extension specialists at Michigan State University answer some timely questions about vegetable gardening, lawns, landscape plants and related topics:

planting tomatoes much before mid-May?

If you warm the soil before planting by covering it with plastic and protect the tops of the plants against frost and cold temperatures, you may be able to start harvesting tomatoes earlier than usual. Warming the soil is critical — plants with their roots in cold soil won't grow. You can use either black or clear plastic to warm the soil, but black plastic will also control weeds by blocking the light from reaching the soil and germinating weed seeds.

Warming the soil can also promote quicker germination of both cool weather crops and large-seeded warm weather crops, such as beans, sweet corn and squash. Planted in cold, damp soil, these seeds tend to rot rather than germinate. Because the chances of losing early planted warm-weather crops to frost are high — you

What are the first crops I can plant in my garden in the spring?

In the vegetable garden, radishes, lettuce, spinach, carrots, onions and peas are the first crops to be planted from seed. Calendula (pot marigolds) and sweet peas can be planted in the flower garden as soon as the soil is dry enough to work. The cole crops — cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, etc. — can be set in the garden as transplants in mid-April in central lower Michigan.

Is there any real advantage to

# The garden corner:

have to forget to protect them only once — it's wise to try early planting with only a few plants or a short row of seeds rather than risk an entire planting and your whole harvest. If you do lose the first planting, you still have plenty of time to replant.

tuberous begonias produce flowers nearly a foot in diameter in brilliant shades of red, pink, coral, salmon, yellow and white. Coleus is grown for its colored and often exotically shaped foliage.

Any of these would do well in a northern exposure. In an eastern exposure, where plants would get sun in the morning and shade in the afternoon, you could also plant salvia or nicotiana (flowering tobacco). Most shade-tolerant plants will do well in a site with morning sun and afternoon shade but will not thrive in a spot shaded in the morning and exposed to the hot, harsh afternoon sun.

What flowering annuals do well in shaded spots? My patio is on the north side of my house, and I'd like to plant something colorful in the narrow bed between the house and the patio?

Impatiens, fibrous-rooted begonias, tuberous begonias and coleus are probably the most popular and widely available flowering annuals for shade. Impatiens, coleus and fibrous begonias can be purchased in flats or multi-packs and transplanted after the danger of frost is past. Tuberous begonias must be started indoors in early spring.

Impatiens forms thick mounds covered with 1 to 2 inch flowers in a wide range of bright colors. Fibrous begonias tend to spread less and bear many but smaller flowers. Some

I'd like to plant several varieties of summer squash, but a hill of each type planted according to the directions on the seed packet would produce enough squash for a small army. Any suggestions?

Try planting three or four types of squash in each hill. Plant two seeds of each variety and thin to one plant of each. This will give you a good mixture

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