

**University of Vermont Extension  
Department of Plant and Soil Science**



**Spring Article**

## **PLANTING FRUIT TREES AND OTHER MAY GARDENING TIPS**

By Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor  
Dr. Vern Grubinger, Extension Vegetable and Small Fruit Specialist

The watchword for May is "patience." If you are like most gardeners, you probably can't wait to get the garden planted. Although many crops like peas, lettuce, spinach, broccoli, cabbage, kale, and onions can be planted outdoors in late April and early May in most locations, heat-loving crops should not be planted until late May or even early June, depending on where you live.

Unless you like to gamble on the weather, and don't mind the time and expense of replanting if you are wrong, wait to plant tomatoes, peppers, squashes, and most other vegetables and flowers until after the last average frost date for your area. This is around mid-May in the warmest parts of the state and early June in the coldest locations and higher elevations. Even though many areas have depleted water supplies due to drought conditions, if your garden is in a wet spot, or there have been recent soaking rains, you should wait until the soil dries out before you can till or plant. Working wet soil will destroy its structure and cause compaction, which, in turn, retards plant growth.

When you do till, that's the time to incorporate lime, fertilizer and compost into the soil. Find out what your soil's nutrient requirements are by having it tested. Kits are available from all University of Vermont Extension offices.

If you want to add some fruit trees to your property, buy only from reputable nurseries that guarantee plants are true to name and of high quality. Make sure the tree will do well in your hardiness zone. Not all fruits can be grown successfully in the north country. For cross-pollination, which helps the tree produce fruit, you may need to plant more than one variety. Trained garden center or nursery staff can help you pick the right trees.

Avoid oversized, ready-to-bear nursery trees, which are more expensive to buy and harder to transplant. A two- to three-year-old tree with good branching structure is your best bet. Bare-rooted trees are usually cheaper--less labor is required by the grower--and you'll be able to examine the roots to make sure they are healthy.

If you don't plan to plant your new fruit tree right away, keep the roots damp, either by covering with wet hay or by placing the roots in a shallow trench and covering them with moist soil. When it's time to plant, dig a hole large enough and deep enough to allow you to carefully spread out the roots without bending, breaking, or crowding. To help your fruit trees survive, provide at least an inch of water each week from May through September and an occasional dose of fertilizer

May is the month to roll out the welcome mat for birds and butterflies in your garden by providing the food and water they need to survive. For birds, add a birdbath to a favorite flowerbed. Create a healthy habitat for them by planting trees, shrubs, and other vegetation, choosing plants that not only provide food and shelter, but that are suitable for your site's climatic and soil conditions. Evergreens, especially white cedars and spruces, provide excellent winter cover as well.

Hummingbirds are especially attracted to red-colored flowers, so include bee balm, salvia, and phlox in your flower gardens, or fill your window boxes with red petunias or fuchsia. Because the flowers won't come into bloom until later in the summer, hang a feeder now. Fill with commercial nectar mix or prepare your own using

four parts water to one part sugar. Do not add artificial sweeteners, honey, or coloring. Boil the homemade solution for two minutes and cool before using in the feeder.

Keep the feeder clean, changing the sugar-water mix every few days during the hotter months. Finches, orioles, and other birds also enjoy nectar, so consider putting out dishes for these feathered friends.

Plan your butterfly garden for a spot with plenty of sunshine and protection from the wind. Include a flat rock for sun bathing and a source of water like a shallow dish. To encourage butterflies to spend the summer in your garden include the species they prefer, such as butterfly weed, daisies, lilacs, snapdragons, phlox, zinnias, coreopsis, and heliotrope. If possible, plant flowers that bloom at different times so you'll have a continual supply of nectar.

As daffodils, tulips, and other spring-flowering bulbs flower and fade, resist the temptation to remove the green foliage. The bulbs need the nutrients in the leaves to create next year's blooms.

To help improve the look of these beds, you have several options. First, once a week remove any dead, brown foliage. Bend the green leaves over and tie with a rubber band or by twisting a piece of foliage around the clump.

You also can place a few pots of pansies in the bulb beds to help disguise the fading foliage. When the weather warms up towards the end of May, plant marigolds, geraniums, and other bedding plants in the bed.

Other activities for May: prune lilacs and crabapples after bloom; sharpen mower blades; start a garden journal; visit perennial display gardens for design ideas (for a free brochure send a self-addressed, stamped business size envelope to Vermont Association of Professional Horticulturists, P.O. Box 396, Jonesville, Vt. 05466)

---

[Return to Perry's Perennial Pages, Articles](#)

