Sow Some Seeds
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Although some of us got snow last week, spring has persevered. Daffodils and forsythia are in full bloom, grass is greening, and leaves are emerging from dormant buds. It’s time to start planting some of those vegetable seeds. Cool season crops, like lettuce, radishes and kale, can be planted when the soil temperatures average 40 degrees F.

How does one take the temperature of the soil? Same way one does with a person, using a thermometer but a special one designed for soils. They typically cost less than $15 and can save you more than that when you consider the value of your harvest. Place the soil thermometer at the planting depth of your seeds, usually not more than ½ inch below the soil surface. Take readings in the morning and late afternoon and average the two. Once 40 degrees F is reached, planting seeds can commence.

Make sure your seedbed is adequately prepared. Mix in any organic matter, limestone or fertilizer recommended and rake it smooth. Remove any rocks large enough to impede germination but leave the smaller ones. Soils are made up of many various sized particles from clay to small stones. Plants appreciate the diversity allowing air and water to flow to their roots.

Once the temperature is right and the seedbed prepared, seed planting can begin. Start by noting the directions on the seed packet about planting depth and spacing. Typically, days to germination are also noted on the packet. Most of the cool season, early crops can be planted about now. Note that soil moisture is essential to germination. In areas where rain/snow fall has been limited, be sure to deeply water the beds a day or two before planting seeds.

Before planting, note if the seed is pelleted or if planting in hills is suggested. Often seed companies coat very small seeds with nutrient substances and sell them, often exclusively, as pelleted seed. Making each seed larger by pelletizing it makes it easier to evenly space the seeds. Sometimes seed is offered one or both ways. Seed tapes ensure suggested spacing by placing seeds at recommended distances. They can be purchased or homemade and are beneficial for new gardeners.
Vegetables that are typically planted in hills are warm season sorts that are not usually planted until around Memorial Day when soil temperatures are consistently above 60 F. They would include crops like cucumbers, melons and summer or winter squash. Hills do not reflect a difference of elevation, but just refer to planting in a group. Unless your garden is quite large, often a limited amount of cucumbers, squash and melons are planted. As the old rhyme goes, “One for the mouse, One for the crow, One to rot, And one to Grow” so typically 4 to 5 seeds of these crops were planted in an 8 to 12 inch circle spaced about 4 feet or so apart. It is a bit too early to plant these crops – hold off until mid-May, weather depending.

Do start planting cold weather crops like lettuce, radishes and kale. Using your hoe for long rows and maybe a trowel for shorter ones, create a shallow furrow at the depth recommended for planting the seeds of the particular crop you want to grow. As a general rule of thumb, seeds are planted at a depth of approximately 4 times their diameter. Cover the seeds with soil lightly and I like to sprinkle some untreated grass clippings over the row to keep moisture in and avoid soil crusting for a more successful germination rate. Note that seeds do not have to be planted in a row. Many gardeners prefer to plant in blocks or even follow square foot gardening spacing suggestions.

Do somehow mark where the seeds are planted so you know where to look for emerging seedlings and also where to water if necessary. If the soil is already moist, just give the newly planted seeds a very light watering – just enough to settle the soil.

Once your seedlings emerge and produce their first set of true leaves, you may have to thin them. Seeds such as beets and chard produce clusters of seedlings so they would need to be thinned to the strongest plant. Check the seed packet for recommended spacing. It is recommended to cut the extra plants out but pinching them at the base works well too. Use the tender, tasty thinnings in salads and stir fries. Young plants can also be transplanted to other parts of the garden if desired.

So, go ahead and plant some early vegetable seeds and reap a home-grown harvest. If you have questions about direct seeding or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.
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Direct sow 1/2" deep, 1" apart in early spring through late summer. Sow every 2 weeks for continuous harvest. Thin to 3-6" apart. Germ 7-14 days. 30 days