

Mother Nature continues to fool her delicate plants

This time of year is buzzing with possibilities. The last spring frost of the year most likely has passed us by, clearing the way for warm-weather plantings. And although it's a bit on the late side for trees, shrubs, and peas, we can be sure to plant greens, cole crops, cover crops, carrots, radishes, potatoes, onions, perennials, flowers, and herbs with abandon. To be on the safe side, it's always a good idea to wait until after May 31, for tomatoes, corn, squash, peppers, eggplant, pumpkins, and the like. Unless we have another freak late frost, I would say, "Plant away after Memorial Day!"

ical Maine spring: the one thing you can count on is the weather



GARDEN WORKS

by Emily Cates

being unpredictable! Being prepared for this challenge is one way we can stay ahead of the game.

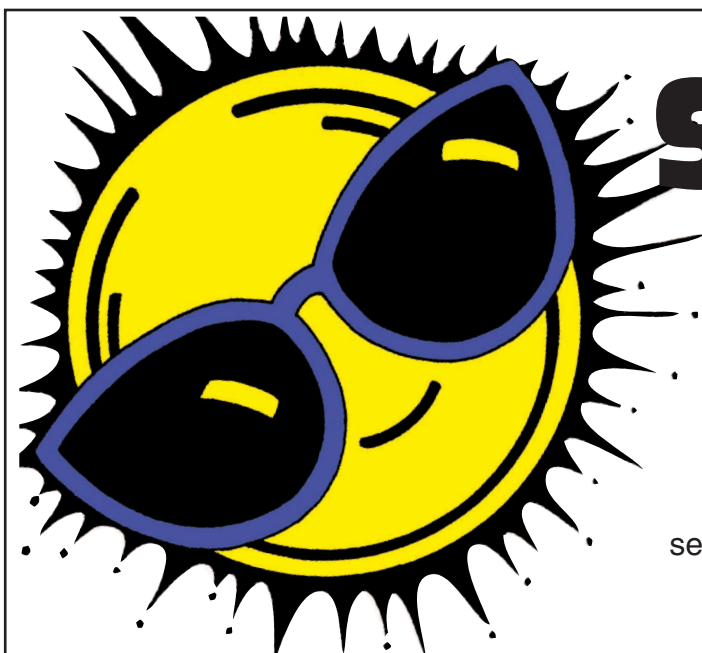
Unfortunately, there is little most of us could do to prevent the late heavy frost we received the other week that followed a period of record highs. This pattern fooled many flowering shrubs and fruit trees into blooming only to be nipped by the frost. Though this will mean little or no fruit this year for the affected specimens, we can take to heart that hopefully this won't happen again next year. And if it does, it may help to consider planting cultivars that are late blooming, frost tolerant, or extra hardy. Most of our area is in zone 4 (-20 to -30 degrees F) with occasional zone 5S (-10 to -20 degrees F).

Choosing a perennial plant, shrub, or tree that is rated to grow in the next zone down - zone 3 (-30 to -40 degrees F), for instance - will ensure a plant's hardiness. Remember, too, that a heavy snow pack should act as a blanket and keep a plant warmer than if there is low accumulation; so might a heavy mulch.

One thing that certainly didn't mind the weather was the weeds. These guys are public enemy Number One in many gardens. Any efforts to minimize them early in the season before they go to seed will help keep them at bay throughout this growing season and others. Cultivating, hand-pulling, mulching, and growing in raised beds and containers are all earth-friendly ways to make the job easier without resorting to chemical herbicides. Undiluted plain distilled vinegar works wonders on the ones in the cracks in the walkway and driveway.

Plus, it's cheap, eco-friendly, and safe to use around children and pets. Give it a try. And if you're really adventurous, maybe you'll consider the possibility of raising weeder geese in the garden. Many folks pen them in the strawberry patch until the fruit forms. They eat the weeds, but not the strawberry plants - though it should be noted that they love the fruits as much as we do. (Hence timing is important with this particular venture.)

While you're planting seeds in the garden, remember to grow some plants that attract beneficial insects. Most of these have umbrella-like flowers such as those found on dill, fennel, carrot, caraway, valerian, angelica, and Queen Anne's lace. And don't forget to plant some edible flowers like nasturtiums and delicious herbs like basil. And for a change of pace, try growing heirloom and open-pollinated seed varieties and save the seeds for next year. Or try making a completely new variety altogether by cross-pollinating two different varieties of the same plant that will cross, such as cucumbers. Ah, the possibilities of the late-spring garden!



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