

Ready, Set, Grow!

This winter's been a real roller coaster of weather, including TWO snows in Louisiana, record low temperatures in our area, and the warmest February on record. By the time this article is printed, we may be lamenting one last freeze or sweltering in the March sun. Who knows?



The Farmer's Almanac says our last likely frost date passed February 14th, so averages say we should be clear to plant spring plants now. Also importantly, some dry sunny days have increased the soil temperature. Besides surviving the weather, we want our plants to actually grow. Warmer soil is generally better for spring gardeners.

Since we'll be planting soon (those of us who haven't already), let's talk about fertilizer. Ornamentals want a "sprinkling" of fertilizer, preferably slow-release, at planting time or a little before. Incorporate it into the soil or toss it onto the soil surface, then cover it with mulch. Mulch will help keep weeds down, keep moisture level, and generally neaten up the bed.

Vegetables require more fertilizer than ornamentals, and it's very helpful to work it into the garden a week or two ahead of planting. It's best to have a soil test done (find mail-off boxes at local feed stores, nurseries, or LaPlace Library), but usually 8-8-8 or 13-13-13 will do. Our Louisiana Vegetable Guide (found online or I can email it to you) recommends about four to six pounds per hundred foot row. This assumes a three-foot wide row. Shift the decimal and you get half a pound for a ten foot row. If you've only got a few plants, they'll want roughly a teaspoon each.

The three numbers on the fertilizer bag represent the concentrations of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (N-P-K for short) by percentage. These are “macronutrients,” those the plants need in relatively large supply. The P and K in the pre-plant fertilizer will last you all season. But nitrogen is volatile and should be replenished later.

This brings us to “sidedressing.” This term refers to a supplemental nitrogen application given a little after plants are beginning vigorous growth. Timing may be “when vines start to run” or “at the first and third set of blooms.” It’s different for different crops, so again refer to our vegetable guide. Lots of nitrogen sources exist, including calcium nitrate, urea, and ammonium sulfate.

The term “sidedressing” comes from the idea that it’s best to add that nitrogen on the side of a plant. Surrounding the plant with fertilizer or applying it close to the stem can be a bit risky. If it’s watered or rained in, then we get a period of drought... You guessed it – fried plants. If only one side of roots gets damaged, the plant will have a better chance to recover.

Vegetables to plant this month include tomatoes, peppers, squash, and cucumbers. We can plant beans and peas now too, which “find” their own nitrogen and need no sidedressing. Eggplants and okra can also be planted in March. But it’s best to hold off until later in the month or even April when soil temperatures are higher... assuming the weather holds.

If you want to know more about gardening, landscaping, or anything else horticultural, contact the St. John / St. James Parishes County Agent André Brock at abrock@agcenter.lsu.edu. Also, the LSU Ag Center’s website can be accessed at www.lsuagcenter.com with lots of user-friendly information, including this article.