



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Start Growing Your Own Food Right Now!

Kevin Milaeger

According to the National Weather Service, we just had our coldest winter in 100 years, here in Racine. As a result, the ground was frozen deeper than usual. My friend at a local cemetery said we had up to 48" of frost in the ground this year, far from the record of about 72", but much more than we usually have. Now the ground frost is nearly gone, but cold air temperatures persist. (The frost would have been deeper but for our heavy snowfall.) With last year's weather in mind, I was planning on planting a few cold tolerant plants around April 1, but I now think I'll have to wait a bit---the forecast is still calling for some pretty cool nights. The plants we are selling in our "[Greens to Grow](#)" collection ([see previous blogs](#)) are all fairly tolerant of chilly temperatures. But established plants are much more resilient than those freshly planted. So, I wait for April 1st or so before I consider planting. Then, when the weather forecast calls for a string of nights to be in the upper 30's or higher, I go ahead and plant. When the inevitable cold spell follows later, the plants will be somewhat established and will be better equipped to survive the chill. If you are unable to dig directly in the garden, why not try Edi-Bowls? [Click here](#) to read about them.



red romaine lettuce edi-bowl



assorted greens edi-bowl

inevitable cold spell follows later, the plants will be somewhat established and will be better equipped to survive the chill. If you are unable to dig directly in the garden, why not try Edi-Bowls? [Click here](#) to read about them.

This time of year marks a significant weather note here in southeast Wisconsin. After April 1st, the average nighttime temperature creeps above freezing for the first time. (I'll ignore the fact that that means about half the nights are below freezing. Like all gardeners, I'd rather focus on the positive.) Although I keep that historical data in the back of my mind, there is nothing like common sense. That's why I use a soil thermometer. Soil temperature is particularly important when sowing seed

directly in the garden. Check a good gardening book such as "The Vegetable Gardener's Bible" by Edward Smith. It gives soil temperature recommendations for various vegetables, plus a lot of other great information for tending a cold climate garden. The first plant that will go into our test garden at Milaeger's is lettuce, and a few other greens. I'll be planting plants from our "[Greens to Grow](#)" collection, rather than seeds. I've been working a garden spot on the south side of our office. It gets full sun and some warmth radiates off of the building, so it is a favorable location, though not large. I've never used row covers, or any other product that purportedly allows you to plant a little earlier, but I have heard plenty of testimonials from customers. Maybe



I'll find time to do some side by side comparisons and report my findings in a future blog. In addition to the row covers, I'll try the "wall-o-water" or "season starter" (two versions of the same product.) This is essentially a ring of plastic tubes, fastened together---it sits about 18" tall and surrounds the plant. Each tube is to be filled with water, which provides some protection from the elements. (photo) Remember, these products are meant to temper the cold, but not guarantee your plants against ultra-cold temperatures.

New to this year's garden will be long season leeks. I've grown many onions over the years, and now it's time to try a few leeks. I am already



looking forward to their subtle onion flavor. They have a few unique requirements, but once they are actively growing the culture is very much like onions. One option is to buy young leek plants (we have them available around May 1st) and line them out in neat rows, planting each seedling about 5" deep, and about 4" apart. Or, you can start your own from seed. Direct sowing in the ground is not recommended; you should start them indoors. Earlier this week, I sowed some leek seed in a small tray in the greenhouse. When the seedlings are two inches tall they should be transplanted into a bedding plant "flat," the kind you buy flowers in at

springtime. When the leeks have stems the size of pencils, line them out in the garden, again 5" deep and 4" apart. Harvest in autumn.

Every year we try to plant a few tomatoes in the greenhouse so that we can have some early fruit. I am not sure when I sowed the seed, but earlier this week I transplanted the seedlings into their final pots---the 15 gallon size. The plants were about 12" tall, and I planted them deep so that more roots would form. They are now in one of our cooler greenhouses. I predict I'll be picking fruit by about May 1st. These tomato plants were grown from seed that I collected a few years ago. Of course, I neglected to write down any information about the fruit that the seed came from. Obviously, it must have been good or at



least interesting or I wouldn't have bothered saving it. This is precisely the logic that comes to mind when I hear people criticizing heirloom plants. Why would anyone bother saving the seed of an inferior plant? Even if they did it once, would they keep on doing it for many years, always saving the seed of a poorly tasting or poorly performing plant? I don't think so. Now, I'm not opposed to hybrid varieties---far from it. But I am opposed to blanket declarations about the inferiority of heirloom vegetables. I like to try them all and make my own judgments. You can too if you want to grow all 125+ varieties of tomatoes that we offer. Or you could just come to Milaeger's Tomatomania in September and sample as many as you like. We'll see you there!