

Is it Safe to Plant? Do You Feel Lucky?



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At Milaeger's, the most common question we hear this time of year is—is it safe to plant yet? The answer depends on what you want to plant. But even then, a specific date is tricky, given the vagaries of our weather. A more reliable method might be the phenological approach. That is, determining planting dates by signs in nature. We've all heard people talk about a warm spring, or a cold spring. Nature adjusts according to weather. Certain indicator plants therefore respond accordingly. Recently I came upon a list of common indicator plants, and the planting dates suggested by them. A few examples: Wait for apple trees to bloom before planting bush beans. When apple blossoms fall, plant pole beans and cucumbers. When lilacs are in full bloom, it will be safe to plant tender annual flowers and squash. Plant tomato plants when Lily of the Valley is blooming. Peppers and eggplant can be planted when bearded irises are blooming. Presumably, this knowledge has been acquired through many years of observing nature. I think it's more than reasonably accurate.



Newly Planted Tomatoes

Some judgement is still needed when following this sage advice. For example, all lilacs don't bloom at the same time. I would in that case use the "common purple" lilac as my guide. It's been around the longest. The apple trees that are referenced might also include crab apples. As far as the tomatoes go, the old-fashioned Lily of the Valley is not so common these days, even though most of our grandmother's cherished it. Although we still offer it, it's moderately invasive, and the leaves turn brown after the beautiful, fragrant flowers have finished. Most folks avoid it, unless they're trying to replicate grandma's garden.



Wisconsin 55

Right now, there are many plants that can be put out. I was walking through our sales area recently and was surprised how many plants were in that category. Anything in the cabbage, or brassica family like collards, kohlrabi, cauliflower, broccoli, and others. Kale, spinach, Swiss chard, lettuce, and really any greens. All onions, including scallions, garlic and shallots. Rhubarb, asparagus, and any of the small fruits like raspberries, blueberries, currants, blackberries. Many of the tougher herbs such as thyme, lavender, parsley, rosemary, sage and a number of others. There's no excuse for not starting your spring planting.



Bloody Butcher

All that being said, I planted out some tomatoes recently. Not to get a jump on the season, but as an experiment. I planted two plants, 'Wisconsin 55,' and 'Bloody Butcher.' Both are popular with our customers. I plan on planting two more of each of them, around June 1, or maybe when the bearded iris blooms. (Last year that was May 27.) I'm betting the tomatoes planted later will bear fruit at the same time as the earlier plants. We should have an answer in July. I hope I don't end up with egg on my face, or maybe tomato.

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) with your questions and comments!

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