

# Garden Smart: Trying to figure out when to plant?

## Good luck

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By Al Hight

Coastal North Carolina is the ideal place for those of you who are tired of the snow but still like some change from one season to the next. That means you're just as likely to hear a "youse guys" as a "ya'll" in these parts. It also means that most of what you knew about gardening – especially the types of plants to use and doing things at the right time – don't apply.

As a public service to those of you who haven't come to fully appreciate chopped pork with a vinegar-based sauce and tea so sweet you can use it on your French toast, included are some of the gardening tasks that are different down south.

We do a lot of planting in the fall. The soil rarely freezes and spring lasts at least two days, so autumn is the best time for most trees, shrubs and perennials.

Flowering annuals like pansies and violas also need to spread their roots into the soil in October and early November. A rare cold snap may damage open flowers, but they will put on a new color show when the temperatures moderate.

Vegetable gardening doesn't start at Easter and Memorial Day is too late to plant any vegetable except a sweet potato.

But, Southerners obsess about the "last frost date" just like you did back home. Historical data suggest that the Wilmington area's last bout of temperatures below 32 degrees F. is between March 17 and April 6 with a standard deviation of 10 to 13 days. For those who weren't paying attention in statistics class, that means you might be able to plant your tomatoes by the second week of March in some years. Other years it may be the middle of April before it's safe. How do you know what the date is going to be this year? You don't. That's farmin'.

We suggest that you wait until the first week of April to plant frost-tender vegetables like tomatoes and peppers and summer annual flowers unless you are prepared to protect them.

Traditional spring crops such as cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower and Irish potatoes should be planted in February to early March. These can also be grown in the fall starting in late August to early September.

Managing our lawns is very different from the cool-season grasses like Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue that dominate colder climes. Warm-season grasses do all of their growing when it's hot – the hotter the better. This time of year they slow down and prepare to go dormant just as a deciduous shade tree does. The cool-season grasses do most of their growing in the spring and fall.

So, the time to fertilize our grasses is between April and August. You'll see wire service articles touting fall fertilization, but that's pretty close to the worst thing you can do to centipede, zoysia, bermuda or St. Augustine. It's great for those cool-season grasses, though

Mowing heights, timing of weed control products, irrigation and other cultural practices are also different.

We have research-based information about all of this available through N.C. Cooperative Extension.

By the time you understand that "barbecue" is a noun and not a verb, you will have this gardening thing figured out.

We'll be happy to assist in your southern garden education. Stop by our Plant Clinic Monday through Friday from 10 am to 4 pm, 6206 Oleander Drive in Wilmington. Check out our website <http://ces.ncsu.edu>, where you can post your questions via the 'Ask an Expert' link. You can also find great local information at [www.nhcarboretum.com](http://www.nhcarboretum.com) and on Facebook. Just search for "New Hanover County Arboretum."

