

It's not too late

By Linda Roe

Years ago, I remember looking out my window one June. It was cold and wet, just like this year. My vegetable garden was muddy, weedy and still unplanted. I wondered if it was even worth the bother. Gardeners are optimistic, so of course I planted it over Father's Day weekend. It continued to drizzle on and off until July, but the soil was warm. The seeds germinated and began to grow. I learned something that year. There is no set date for planting and gardeners have to be flexible and roll with the weather's punches. This spring has been much like that one long ago: cold and wet. Even if we have to wait for warmth, with a little planning we can still get a crop.

Wet springs and cool summers are a bonus for a harvest of cool-season crops such as crunchy peas, big heads of broccoli

and tender greens. Gardeners who long for tomatoes, beans and squash will need to have a bit of patience. The first step is to have your soil ready when the weather switch is flipped. Work your soil, adding in compost and manure. Plant your cold-tolerant crops. Cover your area for warm-season crops with black landscape fabric. This will prevent weeds from getting started and also aid in warming up the soil. Now is a good time to plan a watering strategy. Soaker hoses or a drip system will work well for vegetables. Keeping the foliage dry is the best way to prevent fungal diseases that are prevalent in our cool, wet climate.

Once the weather is consistently warm, get your seeds ready. Start squash and cucumber seeds in 4-inch pots on a sunny windowsill. It will take them about a week to germinate. Meanwhile, locate a spot — the hottest spot you can find — and plan to put tomatoes there. I grow my toma-

atoes in old, black, 10-gallon fruit tree pots on my driveway. My neighbor has her favorite spot in old tires on the south side of her house. Before buying delicate little tomato starts, figure out how to protect them from cool nights. As many a new gardener has discovered, a late planted tomato will overtake and out-produce an early unprotected, cold-stunted tomato. Tomatoes can be protected in any number of easy ways. Wrap the sides of your tomato cage with clear plastic. Or cover with frost cloth, a special insulation blanket for plants. A wall-o-water works well. This is water filled plastic tubing that surrounds and insulates your plant like a mini greenhouse. Keep your plants covered until the temperature stays consistently above 70 degrees, which won't happen until July in some years. Mulching tomatoes with red plastic also works well to help ripen the fruit.

Ready for beans? Beans and corn need warm soil to germinate. Soak your bean seeds overnight and plant in plastic warmed soil. After planting, cover with frost cloth. This will keep the night chill off and has

the added bonus of keeping the crows out. Once your beans have a few new leaves, remove the cloth and put up the support for pole beans. Save a few bean seeds for a second planting, just in case.

Everybody loves zucchini bread and now is the time to look ahead to a bountiful crop. Squash and cucumbers are ready to be planted when they have a set of their true leaves. They can also be planted from seed directly, but I have not had good luck with this. Cut holes in your landscape fabric mulch, very carefully remove the starts from their containers, and plant them. Water them, then leave them alone. Tiny squash starts do not like to be overwatered. Keep your starts warm and the foliage as dry as possible. Bottomless gallon-sized plastic milk jugs work well for this. Once the plants begin to grow, keep them well watered and fertilized.

With a little preparation, planning and patience, warm season vegetables can offer a bumper crop of good eating. I always manage a BLT sandwich and a few loaves of zucchini bread, even if I have to wait until September. ■