

PLANT HARDINESS ZONES AND WHEN TO PLANT IN THE SPRING

Each year, many gardeners must make the decision whether the perennial plants that they have selected are too tender to survive in Michigan. To make this decision they must consider the plant hardiness zone they are growing in and the zone to which the plant is adapted. The zones referred to are sections on a nationwide map.

The map of hardiness zones in the United States and Canada appears in all USDA horticultural publications as well as good garden books and garden nurseries. The hardiness zone for Washtenaw County is 6a. Plant hardiness takes into account a number of factors in addition to the average minimum temperatures represented on the map. Key among these is the length of the growing season and the average number of frost-free days, which is about 150 days for our area. The last frost in this area is usually between May 20 and May 30. The first fall frost is usually between October 1 and October 10. The annual rainfall is important for all plants. For herbaceous perennials the average snow cover becomes another critical factor in winter survival. In most cases, placement of plants in one or another hardiness group is based on at least several years of field trials in various parts of the country. Most of Michigan is in Hardiness Zone 5 with temperatures down to minus 20 degrees F. A very small section along the Detroit River/Lake Erie area is considered in Zone 5, but that does not include the Ann Arbor area. Planting near warm foundations, out of the wind or in protected courtyards may keep Zone 6 plants alive in average years. In a severe winter, however, they may die. Even if they do survive, it is common for these plants to flower or grow poorly. Plants rated for Zone 3 or 4 will grow well in this area if temperature tolerance is their only difference in growing requirement.

There are also considerations when planting tender (annual) plants, flowers, and vegetables. Most vegetables are either cool or warm season crops. Cool season vegetables grow best during the cooler temperatures of spring or fall and can withstand some frost or freezing temperatures. Some, such as onions, peas, and spinach are very hardy and can be planted as soon as the ground can be worked in the spring. This is usually early April. Fall garden planting should generally be done in July.

Warm season crops, such as cucumber, melons, squash, peppers, and tomatoes are sensitive to cool temperatures and will be killed by frost. Warm season annuals are plants such as petunias, impatiens, begonias, and zinnias. They cannot be safely planted outdoors until the danger of frost is past unless they are placed under hot caps or covers. The last frost in this area is usually between May 20 and May 30. Seeds of warm season

crops germinate poorly in cool soil and may rot in wet soil if planted too soon. Early varieties of sweet corn, snap beans, and potatoes can usually be planted a couple of weeks ahead of other warm season crops in early May.

Be prepared to protect plants from frost even if you plant at the correct time. Covering with newspapers, plastic, mild jugs, or straw will protect young plants. These coverings only protect a couple of degrees. Be sure to remove the covering each morning because daytime sun and higher temperatures can cook plants under the coverings.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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