

DIG THIS by Peg Tillery (for 4-30-08) Chilled Veggies © 2008

Has it been cold or what? I've lived here for more than 50 of my 60 plus years and remember lots and lots of seasons of dreary, gray, rainy days. Lots of rain. But, I definitely don't recollect quite as many continuous chilly days throughout all of April.

Questions expressing concern have been pouring in from worried gardeners. Common talk in the grocery store lines and nursery lines involves gardeners commiserating over rotting seeds in the ground, seeds that never did germinate or interminable waiting for seeds to sprout. The frequent cry is, "Is it ever going to get warm again?"

Never fear, fellow gardeners. There's always hope and optimism when you're a gardener. Just think of it as more opportunities to grow peas, radishes and leafy greens. These veggies like cooler temperatures to germinate. The lettuces and radishes germinate quickly and are harvested in a short period of time too. The cool thing is a packet of seeds is usually quite abundant and you'll be able to continue to replant if your first (and possibly second) plantings don't spring up out of the ground. The moral of this story is keep on trying. Get out there and try again.

Most seeds, however, like daytime soil temperatures in the mid 60s on up to germinate. You'll also be able to warm up that ground and those plantlets-to-be by using floating row covers. Floating row covers are commonly sold as "Remay." This gauzy fabric literally floats over the plants. It serves a multitude of purposes. Water flows right through; it's lightweight enough to rise up as the plants grow and it keeps the plants toasty warm without harming them with too much heat. Many gardeners use floating row covers through the end of June in our area. Floating row covers also help to deter carrot rust fly, aphids and other insects. Even rabbits and cats sometimes. But the edges need to be secured with boards, rocks or some kind of placements so pests cannot crawl under.

You can also build your own mini greenhouse/hoop house structures, essentially creating a tunnel. All you need is lengths of pvc pipe or any other bendable material. Bend the pipes over garden beds, secure them into the ground and then drape plastic over the hoops. (Think covered wagon shapes.) During early colder months keep the tunnel openings covered up or closed. As weather heats up open the ends and even remove the plastic during the day if needed. Some gardeners use hoop houses all summer to grow heat loving produce like cantaloupe, melons, peppers, tomatoes and eggplants. Drip irrigation works well for inside the structures.

Check out <http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/eb1825/eb1825.html> for a diagram of big scale hoop houses (think greenhouses) if you have a really large garden space. <http://www.kidsgardening.com/growingideas/projects/sept02/pg1.html> has good instructions, information and color photo illustrations of mini hoop houses and cold frames.

While we wait for warm temperatures we can still plant: radishes, leafy vegetables and peas. All during May pick up some already sprouted vegetable starts at local plant sales

and nurseries. Use floating row covers or construct a mini hoop house to keep veggies warm until mid to late June or July 5 when our real summer starts.

If you end up itching to plant squash, cucumbers, peppers and tomatoes remember to shelter them from the cooler temperatures in the evenings and early mornings. They'll just rest until it's time to really get growing in July and August. Remember, the hallmark of a gardener is constant optimism.