

## Phenology and Planting

Contributed by Holly Barnes  
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"All through the long winter, I dream of my garden. On the first day of spring, I dig my fingers deep into the soft earth. I can feel its energy, and my spirits soar."  
-Helen Hayes

The month of the vernal equinox is finally here. Spring brings with it the hope for new beginnings, in the garden as well as in our spirits. But don't rush out to the garden too quickly. It's okay to rake leaves and move around the yard cleaning up, but digging in the garden should be avoided until the soggy soil dries out some. Too-wet soil compacts readily and is hard to break up later.

There is some planting that can occur at this time and instead of reading up on recommended planting dates for our zone, which might be good for gardeners five or five hundred miles away, but perhaps not for us in a given year, a smart way to schedule your planting is by using phenology. Phenology is a branch of science dealing with the relations between climate and periodic biological phenomena such as bird migration and plant flowering. It is a study of events that happen in regular cycles. The life cycles of perennial plants are closely related to temperature and day length. Phenology is especially valuable for those of us in cold climates where planting times are critical. If you plant too early you risk losing tender seedlings to frost, too late and you've lost valuable growing time. Perennial and woody plants start growing as the weather warms. If spring is cold and wet they will get a late start. Your new plantings, too, should be late as well. A reliable indicator plant common in our area is the lilac. Its annual development is regular and easily observed. When the leaves first begin to emerge from the bud scales it is safe to plant seeds of cool-weather vegetables like peas (flower and edible) and lettuce, beets, carrots, radish, spinach and chards. Hardy annuals can also be planted at this time, for example, bachelor buttons, calendula and larkspur. As the spring warms up and the lilacs are in full bloom it is time to plant tender, warm-weather plants like tomatoes and basil.

With this issue I celebrate a full year of writing about gardening for the Co-op newsletter. I look back at my first column which mentioned all that was in bloom a year ago and see that precious little is in bloom this year as compared to last. The snowdrops are all I see in mid-February as I write this, in contrast to a year ago when several plants had started to make their appearance. Using phenology to plant after such a cold winter makes so much sense.

Holly Barnes has enjoyed writing the garden column this past year and looks forward to sharing more of her gardening ideas with you. She is very anxious to get her hands in the soil and will be checking the lilac bud scales daily.