

When is your frost-free date, and what does it mean?

Around here, the frost-free date is late May. I garden near Montreal in a sheltered Zone 5 clearing. The anticipated spring "frost-free" date here, and in much of southeastern Canada, along with many of the northeastern U.S. States, is towards Victoria Day or Memorial Day. In Quebec, that would be Dollard Day.

To many homeowners, the "gardening weekend" (near the frost-free date) means planting all flowers, herbs, and vegetables for the summer, and then getting down to the business of enjoying summer, patio, BBQ, and all the rest.

To a gardener, there is no single date that "the garden" is put in. Today, in mid-May, I sowed seeds, harvested crops, weeded crops already planted, moved seedlings out to the deck for some sun, and planted some seedlings into the gardens. I did all of this on the same day, and a full week before the expected frost-free date.

While many vegetables and herbs can be safely planted by the frost-free date, some should be planted a week or more later (heat lovers like basil, tomatoes, melons, and peppers will do much better planted out once the soil has warmed thoroughly).

I am kept busy during March and April with many other crops that are not bothered by frost, snow, and cold. Onions can be sown or planted out as soon as you can get into the gardens. In some climates (a bit warmer than here), onions can be sown in the fall. Here, I plant garlic during October and November, but in April, I feed it, weed the beds, and remove its winter mulch to warm the soil.

I remember in the early 1970s, I turned a bed to make a garden (around the third week of May), planted it all in one day, and had no idea that there was any other way to grown food. Expanding my horizons on that idea has brought me to my present garden, where every day of the year is part of the cycle of sowing, growing, harvesting, preserving, and consuming the bounty of Nature.

Today I sowed winter cress (very much like water cress) because I like to grow it in pots to snip for salads. I harvested Victoria rhubarb (the best variety I have ever met), and cooked it with some orange juice and maple syrup. I weeded my garlic that has been up out of the ground for well over a month now. I moved seedlings outside for the day: basil, tomato, pepper, celery, lettuce. The celery and lettuce can stay outside; the others came in for the cooler night that we are expecting.

Because I really want to eat primarily vegetables and herbs that I have grown myself, I also use indoor hydroponic growing systems and indoor soil-and-grow-light systems. I use these year-round.