

The Dirt on Hill Country Gardening

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Patience Is a Virtue!

It is still too early to actively start your spring gardening. Our average last freeze date is about the middle of March. However, we've had crippling freezes as late as April 10 in recent years! A good rule of thumb is to put your tender perennials and annuals in the ground after Easter, and it's really late this year. The retailers have to order ahead of planting time, but you're better off waiting until you're ready to put plants in the ground before bringing them home.

Keep doing your maintenance chores, preparing your beds, trimming your trees, and planning. Some of you vegetable gardeners can put your onions, potatoes, spinach, beets, cabbage, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, Swiss chard and such in the ground in about 2 or 3 weeks (theoretically two weeks before the last freeze date). And, this is a great time to plow through the seed catalogs or to start your seedlings in your greenhouse.

Fruit trees can be planted now. Make sure to get a variety with a high chilling hour requirement, around 800 or more hours. High chilling hours delay blooming until later in the spring as these fruit trees need to be dormant an extended period of time. Thus, they won't bolt into bloom with the first warm day in February, only to be nipped in the bud. Our favorites are Loring, Redskin, Harvester, or Ranger peaches. Most plums have lower chilling requirements, but Methley, Bruce, and Ozark Premier are probably best for our area. All the pecans are great for this area, but our favorites are the Indians: Comanche, Sioux, Chocktaw, Kiowa, Wichita, Cherokee, Cheyenne, and lots more. The best eating pears are Moonglow and LeConte; the largest is Orient, but the huge, softball-like fruit is pretty grainy. Flowering crabapples, pears, and peaches are also attractive plants for early spring bloom.

Plant of the Week. Ground orchid or Chinese ground orchid (*Bletilla striata*) is a bulb that is way underutilized. David was even unfamiliar with this one. These naturalize and do well in partial shade to sun. They grow about 8" tall with flowers on spikes, and the flowers are a gorgeous magenta color to white. They are the first bulbs to bloom in my garden and one of the prettiest.

Chores for this week. - Most of these are preventative medicine. You'll be glad you did them when everything pops into bloom in the spring!

- Spray with a dormant oil on your fruit trees, oak trees, or any trees that tend to get scale or have overwintering insects. Add a bit of Neem oil, which is an organic insecticide, to your spray.
- Spread a pre-emergent, such as corn gluten meal.
- Spread beneficial nematodes, preferably after we finally get a rain or after you've watered.

- Use soil conditioners and molasses and compost on planned bed areas and any other areas with poor soil.

We encourage your questions, comments, or your own "Personal Plant of the Week" by writing David at dsteiny@ktc.com.