

Conservation Corner

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I wonder if the sap is stirring yet,
If wintry birds are dreaming of a mate,
If frozen snowdrops feel as yet the sun
And crocus fires are kindling one by one:
Sing, robin, sing:
I still am sore in doubt concerning Spring.

– Christina Rossetti



On behalf of the Pocahontas County Master Gardeners and ISU Extension and Outreach, we'd like to thank every gardener, vendor, and winery who attended this year's Garden Extravaganza. And while a blizzard warning cancelled Saturday's show, I trust Friday evening's attendees all enjoyed previewing new garden plants and décor or creating a wind chime while enjoying snacks and local wines.

As I write this week's article, we're experiencing yet another snow day, and I am still sore in doubt concerning Spring. After all, we're over a month past the official first day of spring, which fell on March 20 this year, and many of the time-honored signs of spring now lie buried under recent snowfalls. So while area farmers scratch their heads or chew their fingernails, here at Conservation we're trying to figure out how to work in tree plantings, prescribed burnings, and park openings in the few short weeks until Memorial Day Weekend and the start of summer.

In light of our changeable weather patterns, what's a gardener to do? It's important to check the calendar, of course, including our average last frost date of May 14, but perhaps we could also look to nature. After all, trees, shrubs, and flowers are all sensitive to temperature and day length and develop on a regular schedule based on local conditions.

Time to encounter some planting guidelines from nature as outlined by Robin Sweetser in "Phenology: Planting by Nature's Signs," a recent post on *The Old Farmer's Almanac* website.

When crocuses bloom, it's time to plant early season crops such as radishes, parsnips, and spinach. When daffodils bloom, it's time for beets, carrots, and chard. Forsythia blooms signal the time to plant peas, onion sets, and lettuce. Wait until dandelions appear before planting potatoes. When the maple trees begin to leaf out, it's time to plant perennials. If apple trees are blooming, it's safe to plant bush beans, but wait for their blossoms to fall before planting pole beans and cucumbers. When lilacs are in full bloom, annual flowers and squash may be planted. Lily-of-the-Valley should be in full flower before transplanting tomatoes and wait until the irises bloom before transplanting peppers and eggplant. Finally, when the peonies flower, it's safe to plant heat-loving melons and cantaloupes.

While not totally foolproof, following nature's clock should help keep your yard and garden in tune with the rhythm of life. Mom waited for Mother's Day before setting out bedding plants, while Dad waited until the plum brush was blossoming and the leaves on the oak tree were the size of squirrel ears before planting corn. What signs of nature do you plant by in your family?