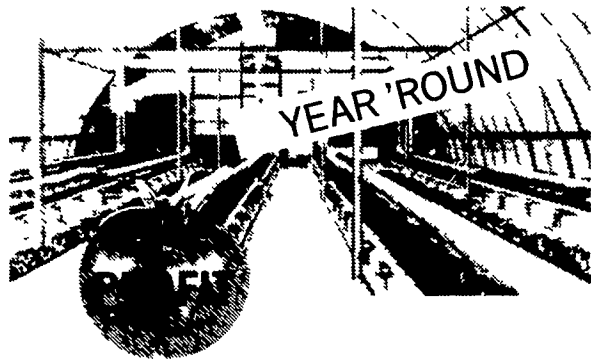




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Vegetable transplant starting time is now

MILFORD, Del. — This is a good time for greenhouse growers to consider producing plants for local sale to home gardeners and commercial growers, says vegetable specialist Mike Orzolek. It's also the time for interested home gardeners to start their own transplants.

There are several advantages to locally grown transplants. They're likely to have fewer disease problems than those grown elsewhere, for one thing. They're also very accessible to local growers in case conditions this spring cause a delay in planting. You're less likely to get a setback in growth with locally grown transplants, once you set them out in the field, since they're more adapted to our climate. And you're less likely to get any weed problems.

The younger transplants are at the time they're set out, the better they'll do in the field or the home garden, says the specialist. Especially if they're sold in soil rather than bare root. Ideally, plants should be 4 to 6 inches tall (4 to 6 weeks old) at the time they're transplanted. Older seedlings are less adaptable. This is something that home gardeners should remember. In recent years people have tended to look for tomato seedlings that are already in blossom. You may get an early tomato or two this way, but your overall yield will generally be lower than if you start with younger plants.

People growing transplants should already have started cole crops like broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower that can be set out in mid-March. Right now you should be starting slower-growing items like peppers. Towards the end of March or first of April, start tomatoes and eggplants. Wait until the middle or end of April to start cantaloupe and watermelon transplants so that they aren't too large when they're set out.

Seedlings need to be hardened off before they're planted outdoors, but in the past some greenhouse growers have hardened off their transplants too much, cautions Orzolek. Recent research indicates that hardening off is much less important than people have thought. In fact, the age of the transplants is far more critical. Hardening off can be done in several ways: by reducing temperature, by withholding water, or by withholding fertilizer. But if this is done too severely, you have a very brittle plant which won't do well when set out.

Because of the mild winter we've had, some commercial growers and home gardeners may be tempted to rush the season. But watch out. It's easy to get caught when you start plants during an early mild spell. A sudden drop in temperature — even if it doesn't get down to freezing — can be too much for some tender plants. At temperatures below 40 degrees, for instance, you can get leaf crinkle on melons and cucumbers. The average frost-free date in Delaware is May 15, reminds the specialist. Planting tender, warm-weather crops before then is really a gamble. You can set out cole crops and other vegetables that do best in cool weather in mid-March. But wait until after April 25 from Dover south before setting out any of your cucurbit, eggplant, tomato or pepper transplants.

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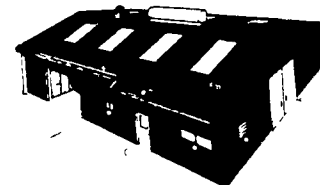
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