

THE IDES OF MARCH: A VEGETABLE GARDENER'S VIEW OF MARCH

By Kimberly Leahy, Master Gardener

To some, the Ides of March (March 15th) is just another day; to others, it signals excitement because spring is on the way; to still others it is a phrase of foreboding, owing to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, where a soothsayer warns Caesar to "Beware the ides of March," which turns out to be the day Caesar is assassinated. Gardeners have mixed feelings—excitement and foreboding or worry—and may feel tugged in both directions in March.

Here in Frederick, we are considered by the official USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map to be zone 6b-7a, although many references consider our region 5b-7a. But despite the foreboding brought on by late snowstorms, we have many gardening chores to do in March that are inherently optimistic—why else would we garden in brutally cold weather? Although we've probably already plotted out our gardens in January and February, we make adjustments in March, and our optimism for a thriving garden rebounds with warming weather. Cool-weather vegetables are surely the most hopeful of all the vegetables. As soon as the soil is workable, we plant cool-season vegetables such as kale, Brussels sprouts, peas, spinach, and asparagus; fertilize perennial vegetables; and start lots of seeds indoors for warmer-weather crops, such as tomatoes and peppers.

For a list of cool-weather vegetables, see University Extensions. I found an especially easy-to-use list at <https://extension.psu.edu/cool-season-vs-warm-season-vegetables>.

March is also a unique month for gardeners' questions. We wonder when the soil will be workable, which plants affect other plants, how gardening affects us physically and mentally.

- **How do we know the soil is workable?**

Ron and Jennifer Kujawski, a father-daughter team, in their book, *Week-by-Week Vegetable Gardener's Handbook*, say, "To determine if soil is workable, pick up a handful of soil from the garden and squeeze it... If water drips from it or if the soil remains in a firm clump...the ground is still too wet to be worked. If the clump of soil breaks apart with gentle prodding, it is okay to grab a spading fork and begin turning over the soil..."

- **Are companion plants needed?**

Crop rotation, dictated by the previous season's plant placements, is essential, but you may also want to consider companion plants. For example, dill and basil planted among tomatoes will protect from tomato hornworms, but don't plant tomatoes near broccoli, cauliflower, or cucumbers, as they may compete for nutrients. Companion plants such as marigolds attract pollinators from above and beneficial nematodes from below. Comfrey also attracts pollinators to its sweet blue flowers, draws up nutrients from deep in the soil, and has spectacular properties for soil improvement. According to the Permaculture Research Institute, "...comfrey's thick and tuberous roots create an expansive root system, allowing the plant to 'mine' compacted soils for minerals and other nutrients...[giving] comfrey its designation as a dynamic accumulator plant."

- **Why do we get such pleasure from gardening?**

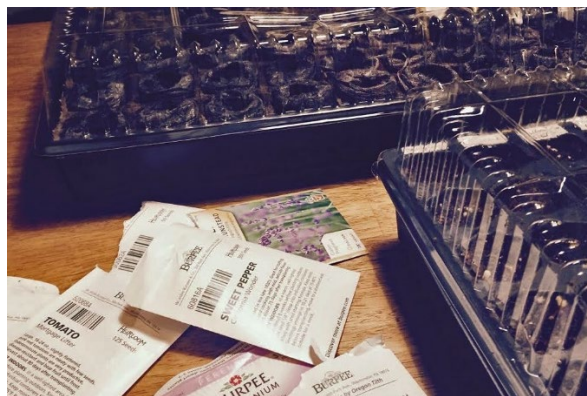
Skin-to-soil contact may be a physiological boon for us humans. A fascinating article in the *Journal of Environmental and Public Health* (PMCID: PMC3265077), titled "Earthing: Health Implications of Reconnecting the Human Body to the Earth's Surface Electrons" makes biodata-based claims that

we experience almost immediate stress-reducing effects when touching the earth with our bare skin, owing to electron exchange. Other articles report that chronic inflammation, itself a root source of many chronic diseases, seems reduced when we connect to the soil through our skin and our concentration, as during gardening. These are wonderfully inspiring findings, but most gardeners will tell you this is old news. We know how we are recalled to life along with our plants.

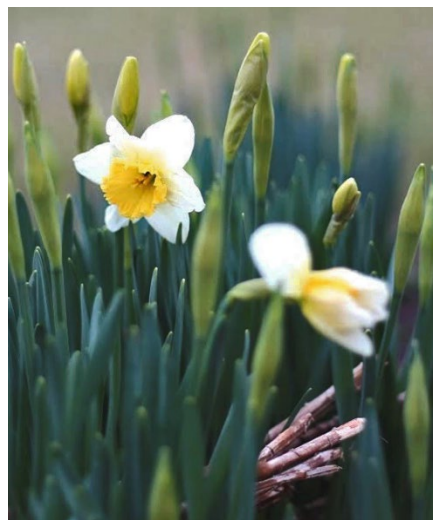
The many possibilities of garden design and nutrient-boosting schemes make March very exciting, indeed. However, as inspiring and exciting as March begins (coming in like a lamb this week), the end of March, by contrast, often finds us worrying (that Ides/foreboding) as we harden off our seedlings, set out rain gauges (too much rain? Not enough?), notice signs of insects (beneficial or predator? Leave alone or treat?), and weeds (spray or pull? Yes, worry). Worry reveals character, they say, and each gardener will handle the worry according to his/her fiber. We are getting dirty now, planting ground covers or getting out our gloves and knee pads or hoes to tackle those weeds.

However, mixed into all that worry and subsequent work is a powerful message emerging straight from Mother Earth herself. The first signs of spring: warmer breezes; bulbs and cherry blossoms blooming; green buds are emerging everywhere. March has a big personality, the Ides being a divider of halves and of perspectives—pessimism and optimism. We are reminded in March more than in any other month that new beginnings are readily available, hard work pays off, we can't control everything, and kale can be tasty if you can just find the right recipe.

Photos courtesy of the author, Kim Leahy



Commercial planting trays are a convenient way to start your cold-season seedlings.



Early daffodils pop up in spring sunshine.



Cold-season seedlings emerge with March sun warming soils.



By March, those seedlings planted indoors are getting stronger and larger. While cold-season plants can be hardened off with a couple of days in the garage and then be planted outside, keep watch for the latest predicted frosts in your area before planting warm-season plants such as tomatoes.



Gnats are among the early pests (offending the gardener, if not the plants themselves) in the garden.
Photo credit: Photo courtesy of TheHouseholdPests.org

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>

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