

The recent cold weather has made been frustrating, because gardeners want to plant our gardens. A good way to know when to plant is to monitor your soil temperatures and the general weather. You can purchase a kitchen thermometer that will measure temperatures to below freezing for a few dollars from many retailers. Stick into the soil for a long enough that the indicator on the thermometer to stabilizes. Soil temperatures should be a minimum of 40 F and more ideally in around 50 F for cool season crops such as radishes, broccoli and peas. At the same time, air temperatures for warm season crops should consistently be in the mid-fifties but above 60 F is better. Air temperatures should consistently be above 70 F.

I have also been getting a lot of questions about when to apply lawn preemergent products. These are used to prevent germination of certain lawn weeds such as crabgrass and prostrate spurge. Traditionally, the time has been when the shrub forsythia is in bloom, but you actually wait until it is done blooming. Another way to tell is to use your newly purchased kitchen thermometer. If soil temperatures are between 50 F - 55 F, it is time to apply. One item of note is that healthy lawns do not often need to have a preemergent applied to them to prevent weeds. However, preemergent can be a useful tool in getting your lawn healthy.

Another lawn question is when to aerate. The best time is when your lawn is growing at its fastest in the spring. Use a hollow core aerator that leaves plugs on the lawn. This helps loosen the soil to increase root growth and air penetration into the soil. It can also help break down the thatch layer. Aerate turfgrass grown in loamy to clay soils annually. Lawns grown on sandy soil generally do not need aeration. Additionally, leave the plugs on the lawn. As they break down, the soil that sluffs off penetrates the thatch layer and introduces microorganisms into it, helping the thatch break down more quickly. Many lawn services advertise liquid lawn aeration. Be aware that this type of aeration works because they contain surfactants but only work temporarily. They are not a substitute for hollow core aeration.

Another popular topic lately has been about how to improve soil. We have tendency to purchase product that claim to enhance the soil by introducing beneficial microorganisms. Unfortunately, the microorganisms in these products are almost always out competed by native microorganisms already in the soil. These products usually do not work. The better way to improve the soil is to incorporate compost. As compost breaks down, it increases air space in clay and loamy soils. This can increase the root mass of plants, making them healthier. It also allows for better water penetration into these soils. In sandy soils, compost can increase water holding capacity. The best time to apply compost is in the fall, before the soil freezes. Apply 2 – 3 inches and mix it into the soil around 6 inches deep. Compost can also be applied during the growing season every 4 – 5 weeks an inch at a time.