

Diggin' in the Dirt: Starting Vegetables

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Small Woodland Association Tree Sale set for March 10

The Columbia County Small Woodlands Association has an annual tree sale in St. Helens. You can purchase a variety of trees in very small quantities. The sale this year will be on March 10 at the Lawrence Oil parking lot (845 N. Columbia River Highway) in St. Helens from 8:30 am - 1:30 pm. They sell both forest tree seedlings, some native shrubs, and some ornamental tree seedlings. Get there early for the best selection.

Row covers available again

The interest in row covers continues to increase. For those of you that missed the buzz, row covers are made from a gauzy fabric. They come in twelve-foot widths and, when we cut the roll, in lengths of 25 or 50 feet. Row covers are used in vegetable production on farms and home gardens.

They serve several purposes:

- Covers increase temperatures around transplants and growing plants by 4-6 degrees during the day and 3-4 degrees at night. This is valuable heat in the

spring and fall.

- Seeds planted under row covers aren't seen by crows.
- Soils warm with the covers but don't crust, so seed emergence is faster and more even.
- Covers can be left with enough slack so that broccoli-sized plants can grow tall underneath them.
- Covers can keep insects out like carrot rust flies and cabbage root maggots. However, slugs prosper under covers so slug controls are needed. Weeds also like it under cover, so persistent weeding pays.

Two years ago, we sold about a mile (!) of cover. We are selling one ounce covers. The cost is \$30 for a 12 x 50' piece or \$15 for a 25' one. With some care, the row cover can last several years or more. You can cut them down further to fit your gardening needs. Call our office (503) 397-3462 if you want some. It went fast the last time we sold it two years ago.

Starting vegetables

It isn't too early to start some vegetables from seed, either to transplant later or, if your conditions are right, directly in the ground now. Some of the more cold-tolerant vegetable seedlings are peas, cabbage family crops, and on-

ions.

For direct planting at this time of year you need either raised beds or extremely well-drained soil. Soils that retain lots of water, like the clay soils that most of us in Columbia County have, warm very slowly. It takes a lot of solar energy to warm the soil itself, the air, and lots of water. The less water (and thus more air) in the soil, the faster it warms in the spring. This is one of the major advantages of having some raised beds. They drain much faster.

The reason this is important is that soil temperature affects the speed of seed germination. The warmer the soil, the faster seeds germinate and emerge. This can be dramatic for even some of the cold-hardy plants like peas. At 42 degrees F, a pea seedling will take 32 days to emerge, at a 52 degree F soil temperature, it is only 13 days. That difference is important since the longer it takes to emerge, the greater the risk of the seedling dying from soil diseases or insect seed feeding. For all vegetables, as soil gets warmer (up to about 85 degrees F), the germination and emergence times are shortened. Tables of seed germination and seed emergence times at various temperatures are on our OSU Extension/Columbia County website for you to download.

Besides raised beds, what can you do to raise soil temperatures? Clear plastic (and, to a lesser degree, black plastic) can raise soil temperatures prior to planting. It has to be installed tightly over soil. Clear plastic acts like a greenhouse, allowing the sun's rays to directly warm the soil and the plastic holds significant amounts of captured heat. As you might suspect, this works best on days that aren't totally cold and cloudy. So stay alert to predicated weather a week or two out. You can then take the plastic off, plant into a warming cycle, and cover the planted area with row covers (see above) to continue to improve the warmth around your seedlings as they emerge. Buy a soil thermometer to

see what is really going on.

One final note on planting vegetables, we all save old seeds that have been purchased a year or years before. Some seeds like onions have a very short storage life. Others are more resilient. Adept gardeners take some seed and germinate it between moist paper towels to check the germination percentage and then adjust how many seeds they put in per row. But there is a drawback to this approach (which I fully confess to using) and that is, germination percentage declines more slowly than seed vigor. Loss of seed vigor is reflected in poor emergence – i.e. the seed germinates but is too weak to emerge and thus, dies. So, buy new seed. It will save you from some planting failures.

Many Extension publications available online

Are you putting up salsa, saving seeds, or thinking about planting grapes? OSU has a large number of its publications available for free download. Just go to <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/>. Click on publications and start exploring.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

Free newsletter

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called Country Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can sign up for email notification of when to find the latest edition on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/>.

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