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# Warm Clothes for Wimpy Veggies

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## GARDEN NOTES

# WARM CLOTHES FOR WIMPY VEGGIES

*By Dennis Hinkamp*

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There are a few trees and shrubs that can withstand temperatures 40 degrees zero while other plants die if they are given so much as a cold shoulder.

“Vegetables, as a general rule, are wimps,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “If they were a bit tougher, we could enjoy fresh garden tomatoes and cucumbers throughout the year. Sure, a few of them such as cabbage, lettuce and peas are considered hardy, but asparagus is the only one that is considered perennial.”

With such tender, weakling vegetables, we have resorted to developing ways to protect them so we can harvest earlier than the first of August, Goodspeed says. Protecting vegetables so they can be planted early is known as “extended season gardening.”

The most common way to protect plants from the cold, early spring weather is to use a Wall-O-Water (tm), he says. This device, which is literally a wall of water around the plant, acts as insulation against cold temperatures. It can protect plants to temperatures as low as 16 degrees. This makes it possible to plant some vegetables as early as mid-March. If you plan to try a Wall-O-Water, set it out to warm the soil about a week before planting vegetables, such as tomatoes.

Tomatoes are not the only vegetable that can be protected with this method, he adds. Cucumbers, squash and even watermelons work well in a Wall-O-Water. About the earliest they can be started in the garden is the middle of March.

Another way to extend the season is to use a garden blankets, Goodspeed says. They work best for cool season crops that are already slightly cold-tolerant, because they don't insulate really well against cold temperatures. The blanket warms the soil during the day, which offers some protection from the wind, and probably provides the plants with that secure feeling that only comes from a cozy blanket. Using a garden blanket can move harvest dates up as much as two weeks for lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard and other cool season crops.

Garden blankets are also used to protect plants from any insects that may be flying around in the early spring, hoping to feast on a shivering, vulnerable plant, he says. Garden blankets can even be left on until harvest to keep pests away from cole crops, lettuce and spinach. This can eliminate any need to spray to control insects.

Another way to extend the growing season is to use hot caps, he suggests. A hot cap is a cone-shaped piece of paper or plastic that is placed over the plant. It does not protect plants from the cold as well as a Wall-O-Water, but it helps, and is a lot cheaper. Homemade versions of hot caps can be made out of milk cartons or two-liter pop bottles by cutting out the bottom of the container.

“Yet another method of protecting those crybaby vegetables is to simply place a layer of plastic over them,” Goodspeed says. “The plastic must be held up, off the foliage, and vented to allow the plants to breathe on hot, spring days. Envision it as a small, mobile greenhouse that is moved into the garden in the spring. On hot days, the temperature under the plastic may reach more than 100 degrees, which can damage young vegetable plants. So, even though it can be a real pain, it is essential to allow ventilation during the day.”

“Whichever method you use, if it leads to an earlier harvest, it’s a good thing,” he says. “Something else I have discovered -- extended season gardening makes you appreciate those plants that don’t need any protection for an early harvest. That asparagus is sounding better already.”

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