

Phenology Planting Guide

What is Phenology?

Phenology is the study of cyclic and seasonal natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life. For the purposes of this article we will be focused on indicator plants or plants that determine when certain seasons “start” and what can be planted.

What are the Seasons?

We’ve all heard of Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter.

Phenology breaks this down into 10 seasons: early, mid, late Spring; early, mid, late Summer; early, mid, late Fall; and Winter.

Why does this matter?

This all matters because if we watch when these seasons are happening, we know when we can plant certain flowers, vegetables, shrubs, trees, etc. according to nature and not a calendar.

What is the breakdown?

- Early Spring when Hazelbrush catkins and Osoberry bloom,
- mid spring with Forsythia blooms,
- late spring with Apple and Lilac blooms,
- early summer with Black/Blue Elderberry blooms,
- mid summer Lavender and Ocean Spray blooms,
- late summer Goldenrod blooming,
- early autumn Black/Blue Elderberry are ripe,
- mid autumn Walnut and Oak acorns are falling,
- late autumn Oak and Maple leaves turn color,
- winter everything is dormant.

What to plant?

While this guide is meticulously tracked from our homestead here in **Molalla, Oregon**, the beauty of phenology is that nature speaks the same language everywhere. Whether you are down the road or in another state, you can use these exact same biological milestones. When a specific indicator plant blooms in your neighborhood, it signals that the soil temperature and climate conditions are perfectly primed for the corresponding garden task.

Why we transitioned to phenology: You might remember that I used to break this information down using moon-phase gardening. However, wanting a more grounded, observable approach, I switched to tracking seasons through indicator plants blooming or fruiting—blending modern observation with timeless phenological folklore that remains highly relevant today.

EARLY SPRING roughly Late January through February.
Osoberry (Indian Plum) begins to bloom. *First shrub to bloom after winter.*

Start Seed Indoors: Cabbage, Broccoli, Kale, Cauliflower, Onions, Leeks, Chives, Oregano, Thyme, Sage, Pansy, Viola, Echinacea, Rudbeckia, Delphinium (<i>Requires 2 weeks of cold stratification before sowing</i>)	Plant Bare-Root: Ornamental trees/shrubs, Fruit Trees, Cane Berries, Strawberries (<i>Pinch off all flowers during the first summer to force the plant to build massive roots instead of early berries.</i>) <i>Keep roots soaking in a bucket of water until the exact second they go into the ground, but no more than 12-24 hours.</i>	Transplant: Primrose
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MID-SPRING roughly March to Early April.

Forsythia begins to bloom.

Start Seed Indoors: Tomatoes, Tomatillos, Peppers, Eggplant	Plant Bare-Root: Hostas, Bleeding Hearts, Astilbe, Rhubarb (crowns)^{***}, Asparagus (crowns)^{****} ^{***}<i>Rhubarb don't harvest first year.</i> ^{****}<i>Asparagus don't harvest for 2 years.</i>
Start Seed Outdoors: Poppies, Sweet Peas, Larkspur*, Bachelor's Buttons, Alyssum, Calendula, Borage (see below for companion planting with tomatoes), Dill, Salsify, Lettuce, Spinach, Swiss Chard, Corn Salad, Chervil, Endive, Escarole, Kohlrabi, Collard Greens, Cilantro, Parsley, Peas, Broad Bean, Leek, Turnip, Carrots, Parsnip, Radish, Fennel (Bulb), Potatoes (seed), Onion (sets, seed)** <i>*Refrigerate Larkspur seeds for 2 weeks before sowing outdoor.</i> <i>**For bigger onions, plant from seed not sets.</i>	Transplant: Snapdragons, Foxglove, & Canterbury Bells, Pansy, Viola, Echinacea, Rudbeckia, Delphinium, Rosemary, Mint, Thyme, Sage, Chives, Onions, Leeks, Cauliflower, Cabbage, Broccoli, Kale, Celery, Celeriac, Peas, Strawberry seedlings*, Rhubarb seedlings **. <i>*Strawberries pinch off all flowers during the first summer to force the plant to build massive roots instead of early berries.</i> <i>**Rhubarb don't harvest first 2 years when grown this way.</i> <i>Gently harden off seedlings for a few days before planting so they aren't shocked by the outdoor air.</i>

LATE SPRING roughly Late April through May.
When Flowering Crabapples and Lilacs are in full bloom.

Start Seed Indoors: All Melons and Squash incl. Cucumbers, Pumpkins, Zucchini, Watermelon, etc. <i>Start Seed Indoors in biodegradable or large pots (you do not wish to disturb roots when transplanting).</i>	Transplant: Fuchsia, Asparagus seedlings (<i>don't harvest for 3 years when grown this way.</i>), Geraniums, Petunias, Marigolds, Nasturtiums <i>Protect Fuchsia from frost. Watch weather and protect from cold temps</i>	Harvest begins: Dill leaves, Kohlrabi, Spinach, Lettuce, Endive, Escarole, Chervil, Cilantro, Parsely, Corn Salad, Radishes (<i>Check them the moment you see the leafy green tops reach about 6 inches tall</i>)
Start Seed Outdoors: Cosmos, Zinnias, Marigolds, Nasturtium, New Zealand Spinach	Plant Bulbs: Dahlias, Gladiolus	

EARLY SUMMER roughly June

When Blue/Black Elderberry, Mock Orange, and Ninebark is in full bloom.

Start Seed Outdoors for Fall Harvest: Carrots, Parsnips, Fennel (bulb), Rutabaga, Swiss Chard, Collard Greens, Cabbage <i>Use floating row covers immediately over outdoor brassica seeds to block pests.</i>	Start Seed Outdoors: Celosia, Sunflowers, Amaranth, Corn, Soybean, Bush Lima Bean, Bush/Pole Beans, Squash, Melons, Cucumbers, Borage (<i>if companion planting with Tomatoes</i>)	Harvest begins: Apricots, Blue Elderflowers, Honeyberries, Strawberries, Salmonberries, Thimbleberries, Hardneck Garlic scapes, Peas, Dill flowers, Swiss Chard through summer, Collard Greens through summer, Cabbage, Broccoli (<i>monitor the buds daily to catch them while they are perfectly dense</i>), Cauliflower (<i>heads the moment they reach 6 to 8 inches and are perfectly tight</i>), Carrots through summer (<i>reach peak sweetness when the foliage hits 12+ inches tall and the root shoulders poking out of the soil are 3/4 to 1 inch thick</i>)
Start Seed Indoors for Fall Harvest: Kale, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Brussels Sprouts	Transplant: Basil, Eggplant, Peppers, Tomatillo, Tomatoes, Melons, Squash, Sweet Potato, Okra, Pole Lima Beans	Plant Bulbs: Canna Lilies

MIDSUMMER roughly Late June through July
When Lavender and Ocean Spray are in bloom.

Harvest begins: Sweet Cherries, Pie Cherries, early Plums, early Peaches, Japanese Plums, early European Plums, early Apples, early European Pears, Mulberries, Red Elderberries, Juneberries, Currants, Gooseberries, early Blueberries, Red Huckleberries, Evergreen Huckleberries, Summer Raspberries, Bush Beans, Pole Beans, Cucumbers, Summer Squash, Early Sweet Corn, new Potatoes, Beets, Garlic bulbs (*bottom 2 to 3 leaves turn completely brown and paper-dry.*), Onion bulbs (*Let them sit in the dry soil for 7 to 10 days until roughly 50% to 80% of the patch has flopped over*)

LATE SUMMER roughly late July through August
When Goldenrod, Joe Pye Weed, Russian Sage is in bloom. Himalayan Blackberries are in peak fruit.

Transplant: Kale, Broccoli, Cauliflower, Brussels Sprout <i>Provide temporary shade cloth or leafy branch covers for newly transplanted brassicas for the first 3-5 days to prevent heat scorch.</i>	Harvest Begins: Cherry Tomatoes, Eggplant, Peppers, Tomatillos, Melons (<i>look for that creamy yellow under-belly</i>), Peaches, Asian Pears, European Pears, Apples, Italian Prunes, European Plums, Figs
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EARLY FALL roughly Late August through September

When Pacific Crabapples and Black/Blue Elderberries are ripening.

Start Seed Outdoors: Radish, Arugula, Spinach, Mustard Greens, Lettuce, Cilantro, Parsley, Foxgloves, Hollyhock, Money Plant, Primrose (shady location), Cover Crops like Crimson Clover, Winter Field Peas, or Hairy Vetch	Harvest begins: Corn, Slicing Tomatoes, Potatoes (<i>look for green growth to die off, stop watering once growth turns yellow, harvest after a couple weeks</i>), Blue Elderberries, Pawpaws
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MID-FALL roughly Late September through October

When native Oaks and Hazelnuts begin a heavy drop of their acorns/nuts.

Start Bulbs/Cloves Outdoors: Garlic, Shallot, Alliums, Crocus, Daffodil, Muscari	Harvest begins: Fennel, Winter Squash, Pumpkins (<i>start checking the woodiness of your squash stems</i>), Hazlenuts
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LATE FALL roughly Mid October through November

When Oak and Maple leaves change color.

Start Bulbs Outdoors: Tulips	Harvest begins: Salsify, Fall Broccoli (<i>monitor the buds daily to catch them while they are perfectly dense</i>), Fall Cauliflower (<i>when it is 6 to 8 inches wide, compact, smooth, and tight</i>), Fall Brussels Sprouts (<i>Harvest individual sprouts when they are 1 to 1.5 inches wide and feel rock-hard when squeezed</i>), Jerusalem Artichokes (Sunchoke), Rose hips, Highbush Cranberries, Medlars, Quince, Autumn Olive, Hawthorn, Persimmon
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WINTER roughly December through January
Leaves are gone, all is dormant.

Harvest begins: Scion-wood (<i>this is the prime window to clip dormant, pencil-thick twigs from your apples, pears, plums, and cherries. You store these cuttings in the refrigerator to graft onto new rootstocks in the spring</i>)	Protect Tools: Drain hoses, turn off outdoor spigots, and oil hand tools. Mulch Empty Beds: Cover any bare soil with leaves or straw to prevent winter rains from washing away nutrients. Order Seeds: Use January to plan layouts and secure seeds before the spring rush begins. REST!!!
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