We talk about the weather often. A recurring spring question for gardeners is, “Has the weather settled?” We want to plant frost tender crops, but we do not know when the last frost will occur. As of May 1st, it is not likely going to frost, but there is still a possibility. About 20 years ago, there was a frost on May 16th. 10 years ago there was one on May 18th. The last frost could, however, be in March.

So, we take our chances. If the seed is cheap and burning a hole in your pocket, go ahead and till the soil deeply and harrow a seedbed. The land needs to be biologically active, mineralized, loose, and weed-free. Before we plant more, all of the spring crops should be hoed and cultivated.

Into the furrows go the alternating rows of beans and cucumbers. These companion plants go in at the same time as a row each of yellow squash, scallop squash, and zucchini. I step on the seed as I drop it, and rake over an inch or so of dry, not cloddy soil. In a few days, I rake directly over the row to destroy weedlings.

As the crops pop up, we rake away from the row. After the true leaves appear, hoeing begins. By planting thickly, thinning is done with the hoe. It is easier to hoe plants than grass and weeds. No weeds are allowed in the garden, period.

Corn is planted a foot apart. Turkeys and crows love to eat the freshly sprouted kernels, leaving a small corn plant on the surface. I have to put up scarecrows. I also dump some corn at the edges of the fields. Birds will eat this rather than dig up the seeds. Pine tar on the seeds definitely defeats the birds, but this method is very messy. Bird life is necessary for the farm, so we have to work with them.

Notice where Johnson grass is and dig it all the way out with a fork. Bermuda grass succumbs to weekly tillage and constant raking of the roots to the surface. It is better to do this a few times and plant later than to plant right into it.

Sow sweet basil and dill into shallow furrows and cover them lightly with fine soil. Zinnias are planted the same way, as is lettuce. Early lettuce seedlings can be transplanted a foot apart into beds to make heads of lettuce.

Winter squashes are planted deeper and get stepped on before they're covered. They really sprout and take up a lot of space. Shelly beans, like Taylor's Dwarf Horticulture bean, can go in alternate rows and be harvested before they are overcome with the vine from the squash.

Melons are the only crop we grow on plastic. We get 6 mil, 16 foot wide pieced and cut holes in a diamond pattern 5 or 6 feet apart. 10 or 12 seeds go in each hill and are later thinned to the best 2. Boards weight the plastic down, and it is picked up and stored away right after the harvest, so it will last for several years.

The cold frame is watered, and the tomatoes lifted out. Keeping their roots moist, they are laid down in a furrow and mudded. This means water has been poured into a small hole, making mud, and the bare root of the plant is placed in it. Dry soil is pulled on top. If the plants are long, we lay them down so only the top few inches are above ground. Tomato plants will form roots on the buried stem.

Our last planting is a field of sweet potatoes, peppers, and eggplants. Okra, field peas, and our later plantings of beans, cucumbers, and squash will go in then as well. These get planted every 3 or 4 weeks, so a fresh crop comes in when the earlier ones begin to peter out.

Onions are hoed, potatoes hilled, and all the spring crops are carefully tended. We keep a look out for beetles and cutworms on our newly planted crops. Soil is pulled away from beets, carrots, and onions, but pulled toward potatoes, corn, squash, beans, and cucumbers. After the ground warms up, tomatoes will get a thick mulch of hay.

The tomatoes are more valuable, so I do not gamble with them. Except for a row of early ones, I wait until the 3rd week of May to set them out. If frost threatens, we put a reemay over the rows. Crops planted in mid-May often catch up to the earlier plantings anyway. I try to wait, but it is tempting to get some planting done earlier. You can never tell about the weather, no matter how

much we talk about it.