



## Mother Nature's Planting Guide

**Take some cues from nature—even the zodiac—and discover what agriculturalists knew about the affect of the moon and the planets centuries ago.**

By Amy Grisak

As avid gardeners, we're always looking for an edge to make our efforts more successful. We're eager to try new products and techniques, but sometimes the best practice is one that's been around since the dawn of agriculture.

Despite having the knowledge of universities and experienced gardeners at our fingertips, in some ways, ancient growers had the advantage. For them, everything had a proper time. They didn't have the temptation of fully blooming flowers begging to be set out well before the frost-free date or ready-to-ship plant varieties that won't necessarily live in their climates. *What's Your Sign?*

Find out what influence each sign of the zodiac has on plant growth. [Click here](#)

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Instead, they grew crops that thrived in their region and used centuries of knowledge by following the celestial bodies to guide their planting schedule.

Since 1818, *The Old Farmers' Almanac* has published a table of "best days," indicating the ideal times to do everything from fishing to transplanting to harvesting for storage.

Managing editor Sandi Duncan, Philom (a designation meaning philomath or "lover of learning"), says projections are based part on tradition, part on formula. Determining when to plant, cultivate or perform particular chores is set according to the phase of the moon and its placement within the zodiac.

"People are still fascinated by the moon," she says. "The moon's pull on the Earth affects what you do." Many gardeners swear by the gardening calendar, even if there's an air of mystery to the process.

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**Something to It**

Planting by the moon's phases might seem far from the basics of gardening, but many veteran gardeners think there's something to it. And sometimes those who follow it might surprise you.

My father has always been a textbook gardener—organized and traditional.

He reads instructions on the packets to decide when and how to plant each variety. Plus, he's not one for guesswork and plans when to plant the seeds so they're strong, healthy plants, perfectly timed to thrive once the risk of frost is well past.

Seed starting is also a standard process for him: His soil is always properly mixed and sterilized. Anyone starting their own seeds would envy the light frame he built. Watering is done by soaking the flats in water to avoid damping-off, a fungal condition that can kill seedlings.

And he's just as meticulous when it comes to transplanting: He holds the seedling by the cotyledon to avoid crushing the tender stems. A small hole is dug with a spoon, and the soil is carefully replaced around the seedling. Everything is methodical and perfect.

So I have to admit, I was surprised when he told me he seeded according to the Almanac's recommended best days. For someone who seemed to follow tried-and-true scientific planting methods, it seemed a bit on the hocus-pocus side to me.

"I never said it works," he claims, "but I found that there were some circumstances that took place that I thought I better take into consideration."

One of the first instances was when he helped a friend clear brush to put up fencing. After working all day, he didn't think much of it when my grandfather grabbed his edition of the *Farmers' Almanac* and pointed out that it wasn't a good day for



clearing brush. Grandpa told him, "It will possibly regrow before you put in the fence."

That's exactly what happened. "Whether it was the Almanac or what, the vegetation did grow back," my father notes.

The next situation occurred when he and Maggi, my stepmother, planted several vegetable varieties, including potatoes, at our family farm. Once again, my grandfather checked the Almanac and told Dad it wasn't a good time to plant root crops. But Dad wasn't about to dig up the potatoes to wait for a better day.

A few days later, his cousin, Edward, asked him if he'd plant potatoes for him, too. Dad planted the same potato variety from the same bag of seed potatoes in the same field as his own potatoes. The only difference was the date, which according to the Almanac, was the correct time for root crops.

"When the crop matured in the fall, there were six-times more potatoes per hill in Edward's as in ours," Dad says. "That's when I thought maybe I should look at this."

Thirty years later, he still takes the dates into consideration. "I always plant my seeds according to the Almanac," he says. In addition, when it fits into his busy spring schedule, he prefers to transplant on the "best days" to ensure healthy plants. It's a small effort for potentially significant rewards.

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#### Giving It a Try

Gardening by the Farmers' Almanac's best days doesn't mean you only have one opportunity to complete your mission during the season. There are typically several days throughout, depending on the task, so it's possible to work around erratic weather, particularly in the spring.

Even though I'm not as organized as my father (my transplanting techniques look more like backhoe work than his careful process), I decided to try seeding, informally, by the scheduled dates.

I chose two crops—tomatoes and basil—for my experiment. I used the same-sized container for each one and did my initial seeding on the proper date followed by an "off"-date seeding a couple of days later.

After seeding, I covered the containers with cellophane to maintain moisture and set them on top of the refrigerator.

There was a difference in germination. With the tomatoes, 28 of the 30 seeds germinated in the best days batch, while 21 of the 30 came up for the ones planted a couple of days later.

The basil only had five plants more in the first seeding. It's not an enormous discrepancy, it's enough to take note.

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