

# T • H • E D • I • R • T

CCE Master Gardener Volunteer Newsletter for Otsego & Schoharie Counties of New York

Gardening • Environment • Community • Sustainability • Education



## Is It Safe to Plant? Understanding Last Frost Dates in Zone 5b

May is one of the most exciting—and sometimes frustrating—months for gardeners in Otsego and Schoharie Counties. After months of planning and seed starting, it's tempting to plant everything as soon as the weather turns warm. But in Zone 5b, patience is still important...

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*Grow with us! Subscribe for gardening tips, pollinator-friendly ideas, and local wisdom for Otsego & Schoharie counties in Central New York.*

## Hardening Off Seedlings: Don't Skip This Step

If you've started seedlings indoors, you've already given your garden a great head start. But before moving those young plants into the garden, there is one critical step that should never be skipped: hardening off.

Indoor-grown seedlings are not used to outdoor conditions. Inside, they are protected from wind, strong sunlight, and temperature swings. Moving them directly into the garden without preparation can cause stress, sunscald, or even plant death.

Hardening off is the process of gradually introducing seedlings to outdoor conditions.

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*Osmia (orchard or mason bee)* © Angela Hartley. Used with permission.

## Pollinator Watch

Mason bees are native to New York and are in the genus *Osmia* and of the family Megachilidae. They are solitary bees, with each female building and provisioning her nest alone rather than as part of a colony of bees. Their common name comes from their habit of using mud to partition and seal their nests. Some species of mason bees use hollow plant stems or holes in wood made by other insects. Other species nest between cracks in stone walls or other cavities

Mason bees do not make honey. They gather pollen and nectar in order to provide food for the larvae in their nests. Since they do not live in a colony, they are not defensive. They also do not have venom, so even if they are provoked into stinging, the bite is not as painful as a honeybee sting.

Mason bees are such good pollinators of fruit trees that they are also known as orchard bees. They are active when fruit trees bloom in early spring, flying even in cool, rainy, or windy conditions that would ground honeybees.

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## *Frost dates continued from page 1*

Our region's average last frost date typically falls between May 15 and May 25, though frost can occasionally occur later, especially in valleys and low-lying areas. While warm days may suggest summer is here, nighttime temperatures often tell a different story. Tender plants such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, and basil are especially vulnerable to frost and cold soil.

Cool-season vegetables, however, can thrive now. Crops like lettuce, spinach, peas, radishes, carrots, and beets tolerate chilly weather and are ideal for early planting. Many gardeners already have these crops growing by May.

If you are eager to get a head start on warm-season crops, consider protective strategies. Row covers, cloches, and cold frames can provide a few degrees of frost protection. Keeping an eye on local forecasts and covering plants when temperatures drop below 40°F can make the difference between thriving plants and damaged ones.

Another key factor is soil temperature. Even if air temperatures are warm, cold soil can stunt growth. Tomatoes and peppers grow best when soil temperatures are consistently above 60°F. Remember that frost dates are averages, not guarantees. Watching the weather and learning the microclimates in your yard will help you make confident planting decisions. A little patience in May often leads to stronger plants and better harvests all summer long.

Find more info about Frost Dates [here](#).

[https://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/services/blog/2011/05/10\\_last\\_frost/index.html](https://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/services/blog/2011/05/10_last_frost/index.html). ■



*Pollinator continued from page 1*

There are 140 species of *Osmia* in North America. The blue orchard bee (*Osmia lignaria*) is especially prized for its efficiency in pollinating fruit trees. One mason bee can pollinate 2,000 blossoms in a day, per University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources. Just 250 to 300 females can pollinate an entire acre of apples or cherries, according to the Ecological Landscape Alliance.

The mason bee carries pollen in a mass of hairs (scopa) on her abdomen. When she visits a flower to gather pollen, she bellyflops onto it, directly landing on the anthers and stamens of the blossom. A mason bee is an excellent pollinator because of this direct contact with the pollen already collected on her belly. By contrast, a honeybee carries pollen in baskets on her hind legs, so much less of the already gathered pollen comes into contact with the flower.

Most mason bees are active only in early spring and live for four to six weeks. They build their nests inside existing tunnels within about 300 feet of the best selection of flowers. To encourage their services in your home orchard or garden, you can provide housing by making or purchasing bee "hotels." These contain a bundle of cardboard straws, sections of bamboo, or blocks of wood drilled with holes. The hole size preferred by mason bees is 5/16" in diameter and at least 6" long. Longer sections allow for more eggs in one hole or straw.

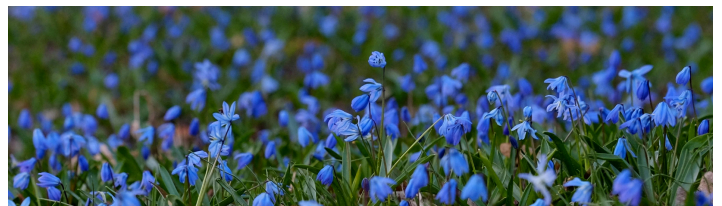
It is best to spread small bee hotels around your orchard or garden, rather than centralizing your bee housing in one or two large structures. Mason bees sometimes fall victim to pollen mites, parasitic wasps, and birds. Having smaller nests scattered widely lessens the risk of losing all the bees to predation. New tubes or holes should be provided each year. Failing to do so can lead to pest infestations that can affect bee health.

Bee hotels should also be inspected regularly. Rotting wood and mold can be problems, and damaged parts need replacing. Ants, wasps, and mites are common intruders that can harm the bees. They might take over the hotel.

Your garden can provide another way to provide bee housing. When you are doing garden clean-up, clip just the tops off any hollow-stemmed stalks, such as those of elderberry, sumac, Joe Pye weed, brambles, and various grasses. Leave at least 8" of the stalks standing. Mason bees use mud in their nest, so also provide a muddy area for them in the spring.

When a female mason bee emerges in the spring, she mates, locates housing for her nest, and starts gathering pollen. She adds a ball of pollen to a nest cell before laying an egg on top. Then she seals the cell with mud and starts gathering food for the next cell. When there are five to eight cells, she seals the entrance to the hole. The larvae grow, become pupae, and then adults. The adults remain inside the nest until the next spring, emerging when the fruit trees are blooming. If you have provided housing or left stalks standing in the garden, remember that bees will be living in them for an entire year. They do not come out of their cells until the following spring.

To support mason bees, you can also plant varieties of native perennials that flower early in the season and provide pollen when fruit blossoms are not available. Some choices include Virginia bluebells, woodland and moss phlox, foam flower, Jacob's ladder, golden Alexander, and wild geranium. ■



## The Green Thumb Corner—

A simple upgrade that makes a big difference: a soil thermometer. You've probably seen soil temperature come up in other parts of this newsletter, and there's a reason. It's a small detail that can decide whether your seeds thrive or just sit there doing nothing.

Air temperature can feel perfect, but your soil might still be too cold for warm-season crops to take off. A basic soil thermometer takes the guesswork out so you're not planting too early and wondering why things aren't growing.

To get an accurate reading, insert the thermometer 2-4" into the soil, which is where most seeds/seedlings actually sit. Check in the morning for a baseline, and if you want to be extra dialed in, take readings over a few days. Once your soil hits the right range for what you're planting, you're good to go. ■

## Succession Planting for a Continuous Harvest

Have you ever harvested all your lettuce at once, only to find yourself without fresh greens a few weeks later? Succession planting is an easy technique that helps gardeners enjoy a steady supply of vegetables instead of one large harvest.

Succession planting simply means planting small amounts of crops at regular intervals rather than all at once. This approach works



especially well with fast-growing, cool-season vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, radishes, arugula, and bush beans.

In Otsego and Schoharie Counties, May is an ideal time to begin succession planting. For example, lettuce seeds can be planted every 10 to 14 days through early summer. Radishes can be sown every 7 to 10 days for a steady supply of crisp roots. Bush beans can be planted every two to three weeks from late May into July.

Succession planting also helps gardeners make the most of limited garden space. Once early crops such as spinach or radishes are harvested, that space can be replanted with another crop like carrots or beans. This keeps garden beds productive throughout the growing season.

To make succession planting easier, keep a simple garden journal or calendar. Record planting dates and expected harvest times so you know when to sow the next round. Labeling rows with planting dates is another helpful practice.

With a little planning, succession planting turns a single harvest into weeks—or even months—of fresh vegetables from the same garden space. ■

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This usually takes 7 to 10 days. Begin by placing seedlings outside in a sheltered, shady location for one to two hours. Each day, increase their time outdoors and gradually expose them to more sunlight and wind.

Avoid setting seedlings outside on particularly cold or windy days. Nighttime temperatures below 45°F can damage tender plants such as tomatoes and peppers, so bring them indoors if temperatures drop.

During the hardening-off period, you may notice seedlings grow more slowly. This is normal. Plants are adjusting to new conditions and developing stronger stems and leaves.



Water seedlings regularly, as containers can dry out quickly outdoors.

Skipping hardening off is one of the most common causes of transplant failure, especially for beginning gardeners. Taking the time to harden off seedlings properly results in healthier plants, faster establishment, and better yields later in the season.

A little preparation now helps ensure your carefully grown seedlings thrive once they are planted in the garden. ■



# Garden Chore Checklist

May is one of the busiest months in the garden. With warming temperatures and longer days, it's time to plant, protect, and prepare for the growing season ahead.

## Vegetable Garden

- Plant cool-season crops (lettuce, spinach, carrots, beets, peas, radishes) if not already planted
- Direct sow beans, cucumbers, summer squash, and sweet corn once soil warms
- Succession plant lettuce, radishes, and spinach every 1–2 weeks
- Harden off seedlings before transplanting outdoors
- Transplant broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower
- Wait until after last frost (May 15–25) to plant tomatoes, peppers, basil, and other warm-season crops
- Install supports for peas and early tomatoes
- Mulch beds once soil is warm to conserve moisture and suppress weeds

## Soil & Garden Care

- Add compost to beds before planting warm-season crops
- Test soil if you haven't in the past 2–3 years
- Stay ahead of weeds by removing while small

## Pest & Disease Watch

- Watch for slugs, especially in wet weather
- Check for cutworms around young seedlings
- Inspect plants regularly for aphids and flea beetles
- Use row covers to protect young plants when needed
- Remove diseased or damaged plant material promptly

Find more gardening guidance at [Cornell Garden Based Learning](https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/garden-guidance/)

<https://gardening.cals.cornell.edu/garden-guidance/>. ■



## Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer

**QUESTION:** How do I know if I'm rushing my warm-season planting?

**ANSWER:** Even if days feel warm, soil temperatures matter. Waiting until after the last frost and allowing soil to warm helps tomatoes, peppers, and squash establish quickly and grow more vigorously.

*Click here to ask a Master Gardener a question.*  
<https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program/ask-a-master-gardener-volunteer>

# Family Gardening Workshop

Gardening can be a fun and enriching experience for the whole family. Join Otsego Master Gardener Volunteers for this two-part series focused on beginner gardening topics and tips to engage the whole family. Help to plant a Victory Garden, learn about gardening, harvesting and cooking, and enjoy this time to grow food and family bonds. This event is ideal for families with children between 3-11 years old. Attend one or both session! **Space is limited – register early!**

Part 1: Wednesday, May 20, 2026

Part 2: Wednesday, July 15, 2026

4:30 pm - 6:30 pm

CCESO Grow Garden

123 Lake Street, Cooperstown

For more information or to register visit

[www.cceschoharie-otsego.org](http://www.cceschoharie-otsego.org)

or contact Marcie Foster [mkf48@cornell.edu](mailto:mkf48@cornell.edu)

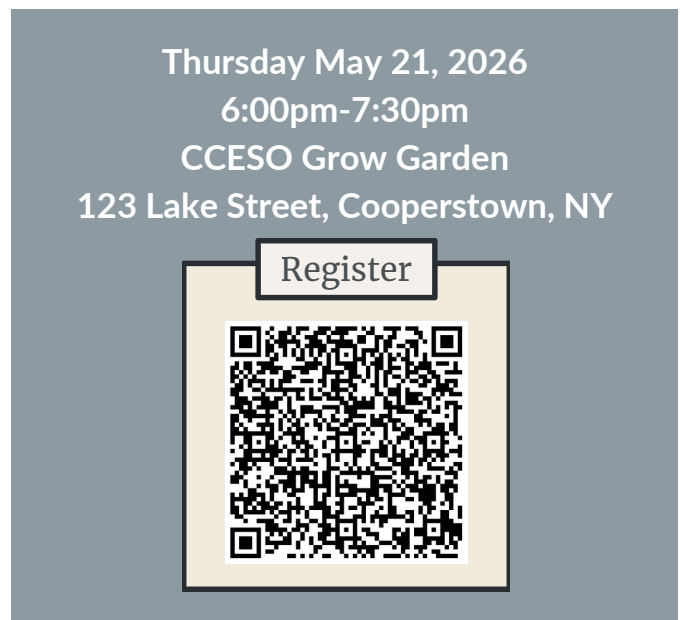
or 607-547-2536 ext. 235



## Starting an Herb Garden

Herbs and spices are more than just culinary enhancements or seasonal flowers in the garden. These potent, fragrant plants have earned their rightful places in the home apothecary, bath, and boudoir as well as in many household applications. If you are interested in growing and using herbs, join herbalist Gert Coleman to discover what herbs will grow in your space and sun and what to do with them.

For more information or to register visit [www.cceschoharie-otsego.org](http://www.cceschoharie-otsego.org) or contact Marcie Foster [mkf48@cornell.edu](mailto:mkf48@cornell.edu) or 607-547-2536 ext. 235



# Upcoming Events

**MAY  
16**

9:00 AM  
2:00 PM

## Otsego Master Gardener Plant Sale

*Fenimore Farm & Country Village  
5775 NY- 80  
Cooperstown, NY*

**MAY  
20**

4:30 PM  
6:30 PM

## Family Gardening Program (Part 1)

*CCESO Grow Garden  
123 Lake Street  
Cooperstown, NY 13326*

**MAY  
21**

6:00 PM  
7:30 PM

## Starting an Herb Garden

*CCESO Grow Garden  
123 Lake Street  
Cooperstown, NY 13326*

**MAY  
28**

6:00 PM  
7:00 PM

## Grow a Row Informational Program

*Plant, Harvest, Donate  
Join us via Zoom*

**JUNE  
29**

4:30 PM  
6:30 PM

## Square Foot Gardening Workshop

*CCESO Grow Garden  
123 Lake Street  
Cooperstown, NY 13326*

For more information or to register visit [www.cceschoharie-otsego.org](http://www.cceschoharie-otsego.org) or contact Marcie Foster [mkf48@cornell.edu](mailto:mkf48@cornell.edu) or 607-547-2536 ext. 235

# Community Events

May 16, 2026

Otsego Master Gardener Volunteer Plant Sale- Cooperstown, NY

May 28, 2026

Grow A Row Info Program  
Zoom

May 29, 2026

Square Foot Gardening Workshop  
Cooperstown, NY

See the full list of upcoming community events [here](https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/events) <https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/events>.



## Weather Watch

Around here, spring loves to fake us out, so consider this your friendly reminder to stay flexible and keep the frost cloth handy (our last frost date is around May 16 depending on your location). Visit the Northeast Regional Climate Center:

[https://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/services/blog/2011/05/10\\_last\\_frost/index.html](https://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/services/blog/2011/05/10_last_frost/index.html)

Dates	Weather Conditions
May 1-3	Sunny, warm
May 4-10	Rain, some heavy
May 11-17	Sunny; cool, then warm
May 18-31	Scattered t-storms, warm
May	Temp 60° (3° above avg) Precip 3.5" (avg)

*Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for providing equal program and employment opportunities in accordance with applicable laws.*



## Grow With Us on Social Media!



Master Gardeners - Otsego

<https://www.facebook.com/CCEOtsegoMG>



Master Gardeners - Schoharie

<https://www.facebook.com/CCEschoharieMG>

## Our Mission

We prepare volunteers to be peer educators who build relationships with community audiences to integrate local experience and research-based knowledge in planning for and initiating steps to manage gardens, lawns, and landscapes with an emphasis on food security and environmental stewardship.

*Learn more about the CCE Master Gardener Volunteer programs of Otsego & Schoharie counties by [clicking here](https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program) (<https://cceschoharie-otsego.org/master-gardener-program>)*

Master Gardeners Volunteers are trained through Cornell Cooperative Extension who share research-based gardening knowledge with the community. We answer questions through the Ask a Master Gardener Volunteer service, teach classes, and maintain demonstration gardens in Cooperstown and Cobleskill. You'll find us at farmers markets, fairs, and local events offering practical tips, and we also grow plants for fundraisers, lead beginner gardener programs, and offer soil testing to help neighbors grow with confidence.