What is my Garden trying to tell me!

Plant kidney beans, if you be so willing,
When elm leaves are as big as a shilling.
When elm leaves are as big as a penny,
You must plant beans if you mean to have any.[1]

Each year, determining the correct time to set out transplants or start seeds is a moving target. Most seed packets and planting charts use the calendar referencing weeks before or after the last frost date. Some springs are extremely wet, late and cold. The ancient study of phenology allows our gardens to take some of the guess work out of the process.

Phenology is the study of recurring biological phenomena and their relationship to weather[2]. The word is derived from the Greek (phainō), "to show, to bring to light, make to appear" and (logos), amongst others "study, discourse, reasoning". The sequences of renewal, growth, decay, and death remain fairly constant among species and, over time, can be sequenced to show groups of events – particularly the emergence of insects as it correlates to plant growth. So plant phenological events can be used to predict insect activity. This can greatly simplify the planning, scheduling and monitoring of pest management programs even in our own gardens.

Ancient cultures have developed natural calendars which depended on the recurrence of phenological events to plant crops and prepare for winter. Traditional proverbs and sayings were used to indicate a time for action. Much of this lore is still useful today. We as gardeners can take advantage of these ideas in our own gardens. Here's a fun list of some common garden plants and what they may indicate. You may want to begin your own catalog of garden events.

When lilac leaves are the size of a mouse's ear, sow peas, lettuce and other cool-weather crops.
When lilac is in full bloom, plant beans.
Once lilac flowers have faded, plant squash and cucumbers.
When daffodils begin to bloom, sow peas.
When oak leaves are the size of a squirrel's ear, sow corn.
When maple leaves reach full size, sow morning glories.
When apple trees shed their petals, sow corn.
When dogwood reaches peak bloom, plant tomatoes and early corn.

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[1]Julia Jones and Barbara Deer, *The National Trust Calendar of Garden Lore* (London: Dorling Kindersley Ltd, 1989), 27.

[2]Daniel A Herms, "Using Degree-Days and Plant Phenology to Predict Pest Activity" in Tactics and Tools for IPM, 52. Using Degree-Days and Plant Phenology to Predict Pest Activity, Downloaded February 4, 2010.

When lily-of-the-valley blooms, plant tomatoes.

When daylilies begin to bloom, plant tomatoes and peppers.

When bearded iris are in bloom, plant peppers and eggplants.

Once aspen has leafed out, plant pansies and snapdragons.

When dandelions bloom, plant spinach, beets and carrots.

When forsythia is blooming, crabgrass is germinating. Treat for it. Also prune roses and feed your lawn.

When crocus bloom, prune roses.

When crabapple and wild plum are at budbreak, eastern tent caterpillars are hatching. Begin looking for and controlling them.

When mock orange blooms, sow cabbage and broccoli for fall harvest.

Plant perennials when maple leaves begin to unfold.

As always, mother nature is finicky. If you've gardened for a long time in the same area, you probably are intuitively tuned into your garden cycles. If you are interested in exploring these phenomena further, check out Project BudBurst online (referenced below). It is a network of people across the United States who monitor plants as the seasons change.

References

Phenology. Wikipedia

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