

EARTH & FOOD**Peter Schwartzman**

Start your garden now

For starters: Last year I experimented with growing food on ~900 sq. feet of land. With the help of a neighbor, I was amazed at how much food we were able to grow without too much knowledge or effort. Now with one year under my belt, my ambitions are greater. I am committed to doing urban agriculture in Galesburg. I bought a city lot where I plan to start a community food garden this year. As I proceed down this pathway, I thought I would share my progress and ideas. As I am but a neophyte in this area, I hope my contributions motivate others, more experienced, to share their ideas as well. Additionally, since my relative inexperience illustrates that anyone can join in this fun, may these columns inspire some to return to the Earth for its wonderfully delicious bounty.

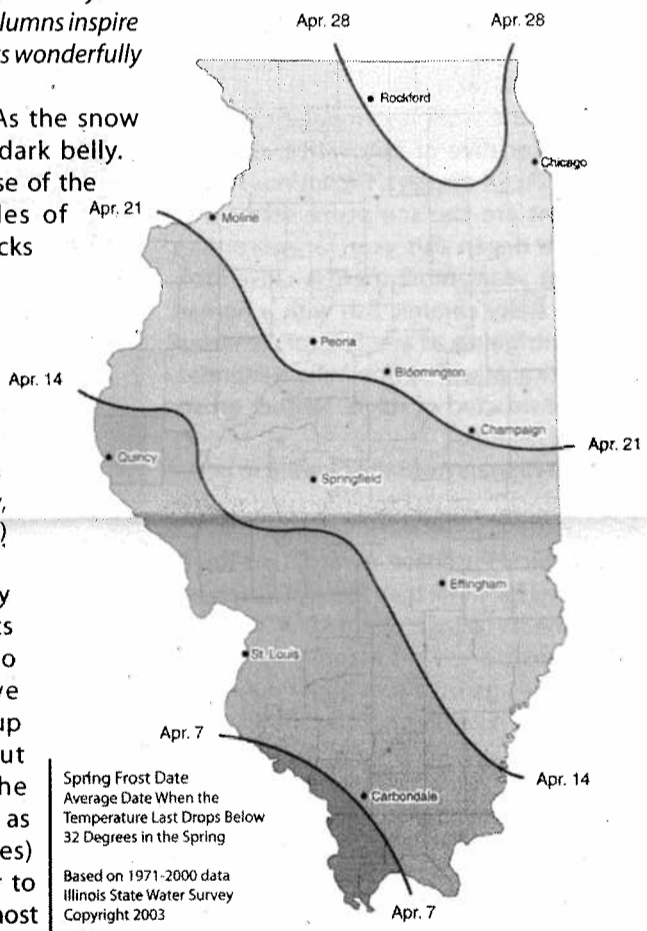
Yes, dirt is coming back. As the snow melts the Earth reveals its dark belly. But this isn't just dirt. Because of the fascinating glacial episodes of Northern Illinois, ancient rocks were crushed and refined into some of the richest soils in the world. Illinois' nutrient-laden soils are definitely its greatest natural resource. The productivity of its land over the last two centuries can attest to this. And, fortunately, anyone with a yard (of any size) has access to this rich soil.

Though the ice has only just disappeared, the plants uncovered are beginning to grow. In my garden I have strawberry leaves perking up and chives are busting out like nobody's business. The sound of song birds (as well as above freezing temperatures) harbingers warmer weather to come. And warmth is what most plants love.

But don't get fooled by these 60 degree days. It is still winter and subfreezing nights can occur for some time. In fact, the average date when spring frost last occurs is April 20-21 for Galesburg (see figure). According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Galesburg is located in Hardiness Zone 5. This means that the temperatures around Galesburg rarely get below -20 degrees Fahrenheit. The crops that one can grow in a region are largely determined by this one value, the lowest likely temperature reached in an area; there are 11 hardiness zones in the U.S.—the lower the number, the colder it gets). Our zone designation limits us some but not very much.

There is so much we can grow here. From eggplant, okra, cauliflower, hot peppers, blueberries and grapes that grow as vines

or small plants to trees full of apples, pears, apricots and even a few varieties of persimmon, what more could you ask for? Yet all plants have internal clocks and climatological conditions that they require. So, in March, it is now time to plant "cool" crops indoors from seed (cabbage, lettuces, peas, broccoli, beets, onions, and, my favorite, Swiss chard); be sure to read the seed package to determine if you need to put seeds in the ground directly or if it is better to start them inside. You can get a pack of seeds for about \$1 at local merchants but if you want great seeds, from a company



that is doing

yeoman's work saving seeds for us and our descendents, get them from Seed Savers (www.seedsavers.com; they have many organic and heirloom varieties and they avoid genetically-modified seeds completely). With seeds at hand and a little bit of "dirt," you should be all set to grow.

If you haven't done much gardening in the past, start with a few vegetables or herbs. Use small pots and put these by a sunny window, preferably south or west facing. If you don't want to start by yourself, come to a Neighborhood Gardens meeting soon (at The Center, 123 S. Cherry St., each Tuesday at 7 PM) to find out what others are doing to get dirt-y this spring.

More to come, but until then, check out info at the website: <www.gardenillinois.com>.