

News Column

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HAVE YOU CHECKED ITS TEMPERATURE?

If you ever read online livestock forums, you have probably noticed lots of posts where someone is seeking advice about their sickly pig, calf, lamb, or goat. The sick animal is often droopy eyed, lethargic, and just not eating well. They ask, “What do you think is wrong, and what can I do to make it better?”

The next post in the sequence is often, “Have you checked its temperature?”

Or, maybe you’ve been to the doctor’s office recently for your annual checkup. What is one of the first things the nurse did after getting you situated in one of the exam rooms? She, or he, checked your temperature. Right?

People are used to having their temperature checked. Some livestock owners are good about checking temperature,... and they all know they should. But, what about crop farmers? I’m betting most of them pay attention to the air temperature, and not many actually check soil temperature before planting.

I get it. If you’re not trying to be one of the first to plant, the soil will probably be warm enough during your normal planting window anyway. That works most of the time, but wasn’t it last year that the soil warmed up early, then it cooled down again and we had to wait a couple more weeks to plant?

Soil temperature is the best measure of when planting can start in the spring. Some like to look at the calendar and start planting corn April 1. Sometimes the soil will be warm enough

on April 1 and sometimes it won't. A soil thermometer can eliminate the guesswork. Crop growers should check the soil temperature and plant according to temperature instead of the date on a calendar.

For corn, the soil temperature – measured at a two inch depth between 10:00 a.m. and noon – should be at least 50 degrees Fahrenheit at planting time. Corn will emerge slowly, or unevenly, when soil temperatures are below 50 degrees F. When soil warms to the mid-50s or warmer, corn emergence will occur in seven days or less if soil moisture is adequate.

Soybeans need warmer soil and the general recommendation is to wait for the soil to be 55 to 60 degrees before planting. Soybeans will germinate at about 54 degrees F, but 60 degrees is a better target. Cooler temperatures will slow emergence and will cause seeds to be more vulnerable to diseases, insects, and animal predators.

Grain sorghum is the next crop to be planted in this part of the state and needs a soil temperature of 65 to 70 degrees for good germination. Some will recommend planting grain sorghum when the soil temperature reaches 60 degrees, but you don't gain much if emergence is slow due to the colder soil temperature.

Gardeners are probably more prone to wanting to be early than are corn farmers, so I should issue a caution to sweet corn lovers. Sweet corn is not as tough as field corn. Planting sweet corn too early could lead to slow emergence and seed rotting in the ground. Wait for the soil temperature to be at least 60 degrees Fahrenheit before planting sweet corn.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

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