

# Planting by the Signs

POPULAR FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, THOUGH NOW ON THE WANE, USING THE MOON AND ZODIAC AS GUIDES TO GROW CROPS IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE.

**By Gregory LeFever**

*Photography by Jill Peterson*



Our moon is strong enough to move oceans, causing the ebb and flow of the tides. The moon also moves the water under our feet, bringing it closer to the soil's surface as it waxes larger in the night sky and then releasing the water to sink deeper as it wanes toward total darkness.

This simple truth – known for thousands of years by people who grow crops – is at the root of what we call “planting by the moon.” The fact that today’s science recognizes the strength of lunar gravitational influence on the earth’s water wouldn’t mean a whit to our ancestors or even the practice’s more recent believers.

“It’s all true, and just a few hours can make a difference,” a woman named Margaret Norton, who in the 1970s used to write backcountry recipes for Foxfire magazine in Rabun County, Georgia, once told the staff. “And the ones that don’t plant by the signs – if they once was to get started at it, they wouldn’t change for nothin’. If they just was to fail with something several times, they perhaps would try then, because that’s the thing made me start tryin’. My cucumbers failed. I planted them, and they just bloomed and bloomed and bloomed and neer did any good.”

Mrs. Norton had planted her cucumbers when the moon was in an unfavorable phase. She learned her lesson.

Going back millennia, people’s agricultural guidance came from a fairly complicated system based on astrology, following the moon’s path as it traveled through the signs of the zodiac. It was common knowledge, passed down through the generations, and eventually was known as “planting by the signs.” Descriptions of the practice have been found on Babylonian clay tablets from as far back as 3500 B.C.

Almanacs came into being as a method of providing these lunar and astrological details, with the earliest “modern” almanac originating in medieval Spain in 1088. Johannes Gutenberg in Germany produced the first mass-printed almanac in 1457, eight years before he printed his famous Bible. By the mid-1600s English almanacs were bestsellers – second only to the Bible – and popular sources of solar and lunar calendar information, horoscopes, cures, and folk wisdom.

## FINDING BIBLICAL VALIDATION

By the time the first European settlers came to the New World in the early 1600s, if a family had only two books, one would be the Bible and the other an almanac. For most Protestant colonists at least, there was no conflict between the Bible and astrology.

While the Church had spent the better part of the Middle Ages setting fire to suspected witches and destroying any writings it considered occult, astrological planting practices were advocated by many Protestant sects from the time of the Reformation. Practitioners in the 16th century frequently cited two Old Testament verses to validate their use of the moon and zodiac in growing crops.

One was the first chapter of Genesis, verse 14, which states, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years." The other was the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, verses one and two, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted."

Belief in astrology's effect on crops was especially strong in the 1700s among the Pietists, a Lutheran movement that influenced the Puritans. Both the Pietists and Puritans were among the earliest Europeans to settle in America, seeking religious freedom.

"Pennsylvania Germans, who were religiously influenced by European Pietists, embraced astrology," writes folk historian Gerard Milnes in *Signs, Cures, & Witchery: German Appalachian Folklore*. "Many apparently even timed their trip to America to coincide with astrological principles and an alignment of the planets. The older European German mystics did not look to astrology so much for what it predicted; rather, they believed the stars could be read in a way that revealed the 'inner essences of God's will.' They believed the stars would reveal the time of the Second Coming."

These religious Germans through the next century would wield a strong influence on astrological agriculture in America.

## INFLUENCE OF THE ZODIAC

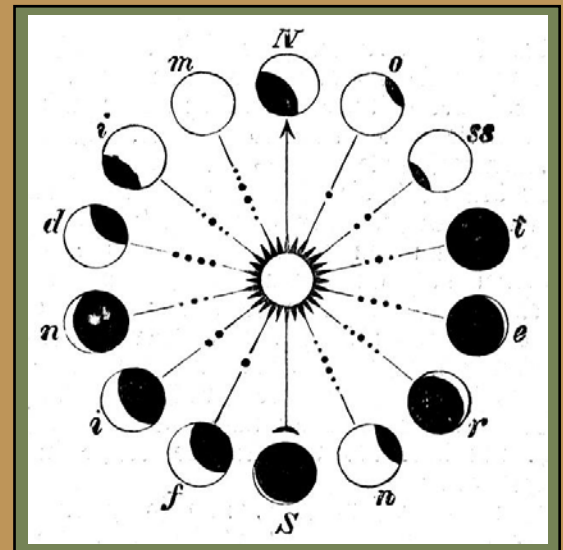
Looking to the moon and stars for crop guidance can be simple or complicated, depending on how deeply you want to venture into the practice.

The simplest level – easy to keep in mind even without an almanac – is planting by the moon. Put simply, this means you plant crops that bear fruit above ground while the moon is growing in size, from the new moon to the full moon. Lettuce, broccoli, grain crops, beans, peas, and tomatoes are the types of crops to plant while the moon is waxing.

You plant root crops that grow beneath the surface while the moon is waning, from just after the full moon to just before the new moon. Beets, carrots, potatoes, onions, and turnips are in this category. The moon's final quarter – when it has the least gravitational pull and the least moonlight – is its resting period, best for harvesting, cultivating, transplanting, and pruning, but not good at all for planting.

In astrology, the zodiac is a celestial ring divided into 12 signs that have specific characteristics. They're also associated with the four elements: earth, water, air, or fire, which is important when you're planting by the signs. During its monthly cycle, the moon moves through the signs – spending two or three days in each one – at a much faster trip than the sun's yearlong trip through the zodiac, which is more familiarly linked to your birth sign.

When the moon moves into a water sign – Cancer, Pisces, or Scorpio – it's a good time to plant



*Moon Phases*

leafy annuals. Earth signs such as Taurus, Virgo, or Capricorn, are excellent for planting root crops. Flowers do best when planted in Libra, an air sign that represents beauty, and ideally while the moon is in its first quarter.

Meanwhile, fire signs such as Aries, Leo, or Sagittarius are barren, which is good for harvesting but just plain lousy for planting.

### MOON PLUS THE DAY'S SIGN

To make it even more complicated, each sign of the zodiac is associated with a part of the human body. As early as 1300 B.C. astrological charts linked, for example, Aries with the head, Libra with the kidneys, and Pisces with the feet.

The best time to perform crop chores is when the moon is in its most favorable phase and the zodiac sign is ideal for the specific day. At the beginning of the planting season, you pick out the 14 “fruitful” days in the month favorable for planting, then determine the best sign for the particular plant, being especially careful not to plant it on an “unfruitful” day, which believers say could cut your yield by half.

So let's plant potatoes. Planting by the moon tells us that root crops are best planted during the moon's third quarter, as it's beginning to wane. This is when the moon's gravitational pull is still strong enough to pull moisture into the soil, but the dimming of moonlight focuses energy on roots instead of above-ground growth. Taking this a step further, planting by the signs tells us that the best sign for root crops is Taurus, an earth sign known to be productive and moist.

We consult our almanac to determine the days during the planting season when the moon is in its third quarter and is traveling through Taurus. If we find that combination, we know just when to plant our potatoes. But if these days are for some reason inconvenient, we may have to use a day when the moon is in Scorpio, regarded as the second-best sign for root crops. But we won't move to Pisces, a sign that is known for producing especially watery potatoes.

“I heard a fella talkin' about plantin' corn,” a man named Harley Carpenter from rural North Carolina told the Foxfire people when they asked him about planting by the signs. “He said, ‘I plant mine when the signs is in the arms and it won't grow high, and the ear'll come out and shank and hang down.’ And the other'n says, ‘Aw, I don't plant by the signs and by the moon. I plant in the ground when I get ready.’ Well, he just ain't got the self-experience, you see. Now all these things, you'd have to go through a process of tryin' and seein'. Then you'd be a permanent believer.”

Now you can understand that when Harley talks about planting when the sign is in the arms, he's referring to Gemini, an air sign that's good for crops that bear fruit above the ground. (It's also good for making jelly, preserves, and pickles.)



*Signs of the zodiac are linked with parts of the human body as shown on this page from an early almanac.*



## WANING OF THE PRACTICE

German settlers began arriving in Philadelphia in the early 1700s, settling first in Pennsylvania and eventually moving into Maryland and Virginia. In the 1800s, they and their descendants moved farther south into the Carolinas as well as westward into Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and beyond. Unlike many of their English and Irish counterparts, the Germans clung to their Old World culture and traditions well into the 19th century. More than any other people, they were responsible for American acceptance and practice of planting by the moon and the signs of the zodiac.

Almanacs with annual tables showing the seasons, lunar phases, and signs for the days in the planting year remained essential aspects of American farming through the 1800s. Condensed versions of this information began appearing on calendars in the 19th century. Both the planting almanacs and calendars remain available today in different versions with varying amounts of detail.

Planting by the signs was waning by the early 20th century, due to growth of mechanized farming and the scientific scorn heaped onto folk practices. The back-to-the-land movement in the last quarter of the 20th century demonstrated that planting by the signs was still being practiced in Appalachia and some other less-commercialized parts of the country. That movement plus more recent organic and biodynamic farming movements have helped preserve and even revive it further in recent years.

Another story that typifies the fate of planting by the signs comes again from the Foxfire people forty years ago when they interviewed R.L. Edwards, operator of a photography studio in the mountain town of Clayton, Georgia. He was on his tractor, cutting a field of waist-high brush when he spotted an old man watching him. He stopped his tractor and walked over to the man to say hello and good-naturedly griped about the brush-cutting he still had to do.

“Well, after this you won’t have to worry about it no more,” the old man told him.

“Why, sure I will,” Edwards answered. “Next year I’ll just have to cut it all over again.”

“Nope. After this it won’t ever come back,” the old man said. “Know why? Because you picked exactly the right day to cut that brush. The moon and the signs are just right. You’re killing it, every bit. Go ahead and finish the job today and you’ll never have to worry about it again.”

“You know,” Edwards recalled, “that old man was right. I cut that brush several years ago and it hasn’t come back up yet. My only trouble now is that for the life of me, I can’t remember which day I cut it on.”

### Learn More About Planting by the Signs

Gardening by the signs can get quite complex, and a guidebook is necessary to figure it out. Farmers’ almanacs are excellent sources of astrological calendar information for specific years.

Among top-selling books are *Raising with the Moon: The Complete Guide to Gardening and Living by the Signs of the Moon* by Jack R. Pyle and Taylor Reese (2003), *The Lunar Garden: Planting by the Moon Phases* by E.A. Crawford (2000), and *Astrological Gardening: The Ancient Wisdom of Successful Planting & Harvesting by the Stars* by Louise Riotte (1995).

As with farmers almanacs, several books and calendars with lunar and zodiac information are released annually pertaining to that specific year.

**Astrology**  
Secrets of the Zodiac (continued)

**Setting Eggs by the Moon's Sign**

Chicks take about 21 days to hatch. Those born under a waning Moon, in the fruitful signs of Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces, are healthier and mature faster. To ensure that chicks are born during these times, determine the best days to "set eggs" (to place eggs in an incubator or under a hen). To calculate, find the three fruitful birth signs on the chart below. Use the Left-Hand Calendar Pages, 114-148, to find the dates of the new and full Moons.

Using only the fruitful dates between the new and full Moons, count back 21 days to find the best days to set eggs.

**EXAMPLE:**

The Moon is new on June 1 and full on June 15. Between these dates, on June 2 and 4, the Moon is in the sign of Cancer. To have chicks born on June 2, count back 21 days; set eggs on May 13.

**The Moon's Astrological Place, 2010-11**

Month	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
1	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
2	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
3	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
4	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
5	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
6	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
7	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
8	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
9	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
10	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
11	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
12	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
13	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
14	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
15	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
16	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
17	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
18	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
19	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
20	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
21	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
22	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
23	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
24	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
25	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
26	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
27	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
28	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
29	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
30	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap
31	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap	Aqu	Psc	Ari	Gem	Can	Vir	Lib	Sag	Cap

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Check Moon phases at [Almanac.com/Moon](http://Almanac.com/Moon).

*This chart from the 2011 version of **The Old Farmer's Almanac** shows the astrological sign governing each day of the year, which is one step in determining best days for planting.*