It's that time again! Time to start preparing your garden for your fall vegetable crops. Even though it is only the middle of July, it may take you a few weeks to get the garden into tip-top shape for your favorite veggies. Vegetables that can be seeded into the garden in August include pole beans, broccoli, celery, sweet corn, eggplant, peppers, bunching onions, peas, pumpkins, and squash. These and many more can also be seeded in September, which is still just around the corner.

The first step in preparing your garden for the fall is to remove all the old and dead plant material from the season before. But don't just throw that debris away. This is the perfect opportunity for you to start a compost bin.

**Make your own fertilizer**

Composting is the process of breaking down vegetative matter (garden, yard, and food waste) into a nutrient-rich soil additive. Not only does it save you money by not having to bag this material for trash pick-up, it also helps you improve the nutrient value and texture of your soil and the health of your plants. Because it takes a few months for the compost to be ready, you will have to wait to use this batch until your spring garden.

Since most Florida soils are not of the best quality, the next step is to amend your soil. This should be done at least 3 weeks before planting. Add topsoil, a soil mix, or organic material (compost, manure) to your existing soil and mix it in thoroughly. Now is also a good time to test the pH of your soil. It should be between 5.8-6.3 (5.5-7.0 is acceptable) for optimal growth and health of your vegetable plants. Reliable soil tests are offered through the Florida Cooperative Extension Service and the University of Florida for a minimal fee.

**Evict nematodes**

After amending your soil, you may want to fumigate or solarize it. These treatments are the most reliable means of controlling nematodes and soil-borne diseases in vegetable gardens. Nematodes are microscopic worms that feed on the roots of the plants, causing reduced growth and yield of most vegetables. If you noticed these symptoms, including minimal root growth, on your plants last season, it may be a sign of nematode damage. In that case, one of these procedures is highly recommended.

Soil fumigation treats the soil by use of a chemical. The chemical turns into a gas and spreads throughout the soil to kill pests. Since the fumigant used is also toxic to plants and seeds, you should not plant your garden for at least two weeks. If the fumigant odor is still detected after two weeks, do not plant until it is gone.

**Use sun's power**

If you do not want to use chemicals in your garden, soil solarization is another method of destroying nematodes and diseases in the soil. This consists of covering the soil with a clear plastic sheet causing the heat from the sun to be trapped under the cover. The temperature of the soil will rise 15-20 degrees higher than the normal soil temperature and kill the pests. To maximize the effectiveness of soil solarization, the garden should be covered for at least 4 weeks.
Fertilizer is usually needed in a Florida garden. A commercial fertilizer, labeled for vegetable gardens (8-8-8 or 15-15-15), should be broadcasted over the area 1 week before planting. This will be enough to give the plants a good start, however, they will probably need fertilized additional times during the growing season. Follow the recommended practices on the fertilizer bag.

Plan your planting

While you are waiting for your garden to be ready for planting, you should develop a planting guide. This includes deciding what to plant and where to plant it. Follow spacing recommendations on the seed packet and remember to keep ample space for those spreading vegetables, such as pumpkins and squash. You may also want to begin gathering all the materials you will need for your fall garden. These can include seeds, bean poles, stakes, string, row markers, or even fence to keep out those pesky garden pests.

Gardens can take a lot of time and patience, but the end result is always worth the trouble. Have fun and be safe this fall in your garden. Please read the labels on pesticides and fertilizers thoroughly and only use them for what they're labeled.

Need some help?

For detailed information and publications on creating your own compost, soil fumigation or solarization, vegetable gardening, or anything else mentioned in this article please contact the Osceola County Extension Service at (321) 697-3000. Master Gardeners are waiting to answer your questions Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm at the Plant Clinic.

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