SPRING VEGETABLE GARDENING

Florida is unique because we have multiple growing seasons for vegetables. There is something that can be grown in the garden all year round. Knowing what can grow when is the beginning of a successful garden.

Vegetables that can be started in February include beans, sweet corn, eggplant, peppers, tomatoes, potatoes and spinach. Now is the time to start planning and planting your spring vegetable garden.

It can be exciting when it comes time to plant a garden, but you should plan and develop a planting guide. This includes deciding what to plant and where to plant it, making sure the garden gets at least six hours of sun a day.

It is important to follow spacing recommendations on the seed packet and to keep ample space for those spreading vegetables, such as pumpkins, cucumbers and squash. If planted too close, your plants will not be able to grow and produce to their full potential. They may also experience disease problems.

Before planting the garden, it is also a good time to begin gathering all the materials you will need during the season. These can include seeds, beanpoles, stakes, string, row markers, fertilizer and even fence material to keep out those garden pests. Have them ready for your own convenience.

While you can plant your garden on whatever soil is available in the plot, you may improve your soil by adding topsoil, a soil mix or organic materials. Most Florida soils are sandy and will benefit from applications of various forms of organic matter such as animal manure, rotted leaves or compost. These additives should be mixed into the plot at least two weeks before planting. Then rework the soil into a fine firm seedbed at planting time.

The organic matter most likely will not compensate for fertilizer. Applications of balanced inorganic fertilizer should be applied before and during the garden season. A slow-release commercial fertilizer, labeled for vegetable gardens (8-8-8 or 15-15-15), should be broadcast over the area one week before planting. This will be enough to give the plants a good start. However, they probably will need more fertilizer during the growing season. Follow the recommended practices on the fertilizer bag.

Water is essential for growing vegetables. However, too much water can be devastating, causing disease and rot. Provide sufficient drainage for excessive rainfall, while arranging for irrigation during dry periods. The frequency of irrigation depends upon your soil type. Sandy soils need water two or three times a week. You can easily tell if your garden needs water by digging down an inch or two in the soil. If the soil is dry, it's time to water. You can help conserve water in your garden by using mulch and organic matter, which have water-holding capabilities.

Keeping pests out of the garden, including weeds, can be a difficult task. Weeds compete with the vegetable plants for water, nutrients and growing space. Weeds are easier to control when small. In gardens, practical weed control is best accomplished by hand-pulling, hoeing or mulching. Chemical herbicides are not recommended because they may also harm tender vegetable plants.

Visit your garden frequently, looking for insects and disease. When pests are present, spray only the affected plants. Make sure that all chemicals used in the garden are labeled for vegetable gardens.

For more information on vegetable gardening and a complete list of spring vegetables, call the Osceola County Master Gardeners for a free copy of the UF/IFAS publication titled "Florida Vegetable Gardening". They are on call Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 321-697-3000.

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Date: February 6th, 2005