HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FALL VEGETABLE GARDENING

With this intense summer heat, it’s hard to think about getting outside to do some gardening. However, the time has come to start your fall vegetable garden. In the summer, we were limited of what we can grow to just a few varieties of vegetables because of the hot temperatures. Now with the cooler days approaching, we have a wide selection of vegetables from which to choose.

Florida is very unique in the fact that we have multiple growing seasons. There is something that can be grown in the garden all year round and knowing what vegetables can grow during which seasons is the beginning of a successful garden. For example, vegetables that can be started in August include, pole beans, sweet corn, peppers, southern peas, and spinach. In September it is time to begin planting cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, Brussels sprouts, and radishes, just to name a few.

When it comes time to plant a garden, planning by first developing a planting guide is the first step. This includes deciding what to plant and where. Make sure the garden gets at least six hours of sun a day. It is very important to follow spacing recommendations on the seed packet and remember to keep ample space for those vegetables that like to spread out, 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 from overcrowding.

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 to keep out those pesky garden pests. Have them ready for your own convenience.

While you can plant your garden on whatever soil type is available in the plot, you may improve your soil by adding topsoil, a soil mix, or organic materials. Most Florida soils are very sandy and benefit from applications of various forms of organic matter such as animal manure, rotted leaves, and compost. Mix these additives into the plot at least 3 weeks before planting. Then rework the soil into a fine firm seedbed at planting time.

The organic matter will most likely not compensate for fertilizer. Apply balanced inorganic fertilizer before and during the garden season. Broadcast a slow-release commercial fertilizer, labeled for vegetable gardens (8-8-8 or 15-15-15), 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.

Water is essential for growing vegetables, however, too much water can be devastating causing disease and rot in the garden. 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 2 or 3 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 are bad in the garden because they 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 suggested because they may also harm your tender vegetable plants.

Visit your garden frequently, looking for insects and disease. When pests are present, spray only affected plants. Make sure that all chemicals used in the garden are labeled for vegetable gardens. Follow the label directions for application amounts and timing. More is not better and may actually damage your plants.

Gardens are fun. They provide many benefits, including fresh air, sunshine, exercise, enjoyment, mental therapy, fresh vegetables, and economic savings. It’s very rewarding to eat a vegetable directly from your garden, knowing the hard work and enjoyment that was put into its growth. For more information on vegetable gardening, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000.

Are you interested in learning more about gardening and landscaping in Florida? The Great Gardener program is set to begin in October. Classes will be held Monday and Wednesday evenings. For more information on the Great Gardener program, call (321) 697-3000.

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