HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

SUMMER VEGETABLE GARDENING

Growing vegetables in the garden can be a difficult task this time of year in Florida. With the high temperatures and high humidity, there are not many plants that will produce a quality, edible product. Luckily, for the avid gardener, there are a few that will do quite well this summer. Sweet potatoes and okra are two vegetables that love the summer heat.

The sweet potato (Ipomoea batatas) is a succulent, warm-weather vegetable native to the Americas. The skins and flesh of sweet potatoes can range from nearly white to brown, pink, or even purple. In the United States, we prefer yellow or orange-fleshed varieties.

Sweet potatoes can be planted in the spring, after the danger of frost has passed, through the end of June. They will produce best in sandy soils. Use plants or cuttings of sweet potato plants in the garden that are disease and insect free. The sweet potato plants do not require a lot of nitrogen fertilizer. Use a low-nitrogen fertilizer on sweet potatoes, such as 5-10-10 or 2-12-12. High nitrogen fertilizers will cause the plants to produce a lot of foliage, but not many large tubers.

A long growing season, nearly four months, is necessary for sweet potatoes before they’re ready to harvest. Once they are harvested, store them in a warm room that is well ventilated for at least two weeks before eating. This will allow some of the starch to convert to sugar.

The only major pest of the sweet potato is the sweet-potato weevil (Cylas formicarius). The sweet-potato weevil tunnels through the tubers, making them inedible. Control methods for the home gardener are mostly inadequate. Cultural controls of the sweet-potato weevil include crop rotations. This means that the plants should not be planted in the same location in recurring seasons.

Okra (Hibiscus esculentus) is also a warm-weather vegetable that can be planted from February through August. Unlike the sweet potato, okra does require regular fertilization with high nitrogen content throughout the growing season. The plants will thrive on quickly available plant nutrients, so a soluble plant fertilizer labeled for use on vegetables should be used. A soluble plant fertilizer is a liquid fertilizer, usually a powder mixed with water. The fertilizer should be applied to the plant every three weeks.

The okra will be ready to harvest in just over two months and will continue to produce throughout the summer. The edible pods of the okra should be collected within a few days after the flower as fallen off the tip and when they are about 3-4 inches long. If left on too long on the plant, they become very tough to eat and also develop a stringy, fibrous flesh.

The major pest of okra is the root-knot nematode (Meloidogyne spp). Nematodes are round, unsegmented roundworms that are very hard to see with the unaided eye. They feed on the roots of plants, causing the roots to become swollen with the appearance of knots on them. There is currently no chemical control for nematodes in the home garden.

Soil solarization and adding additional organic material, such as compost, animal manures, and peat, to the planting beds can help to control nematodes culturally. Soil solarization is a term, which can be translated into "baking the soil". During the hottest time of the year (June thru August), place a clear plastic covering over the planting bed. Secure the ends of the covering with soil or bricks, allowing no air to enter. Let the soil "bake" under the plastic for 4-6 weeks. This will kill any diseases or insects that may exist in the soil, basically sterilizing it, which can make vegetable gardening in Florida just a little bit easier.
For more information about vegetable gardening in Florida and answers to other plant questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take calls Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm. Call (321) 697-3000.

If you prefer planting trees to vegetables, then attend this upcoming tree program. The ReLeaf Osceola tree giveaway program is a very popular program and is still going strong. If you own property in Osceola County and have not gotten your free tree from this program yet, please call (321) 697-3015. The next classes will be held on June 26th and July 9th at 7pm. Funding for this program is provided by the U.S. Forest Service and the Florida Division of Forestry.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: June 24th, 2007