PLANTING FALL VEGETABLES

With the summer heat, it's hard to think about getting outside to do some gardening. However, the time has come to plant those fall vegetables. In the summer, we were limited to what we could grow because of the hot temperatures. Now with the cooler days approaching, we can grow an abundance of vegetables.

Florida is unique in the fact that we have multiple growing seasons. There is something that can be grown all year, and knowing what vegetables can grow during which seasons is the beginning of a successful garden. For example, vegetables that can be planted 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, to name just a few.

When it comes time to plant, one should first develop a planting guide that includes what to plant and where to plant it, making sure the garden gets at least six hours of sun a day. It is critical to follow spacing recommendations on the seed packet and remember 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 from crowding.

Before planting, it is 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 fencing to keep out those pesky garden pests.

While you can plant your garden on whatever soil type is available, you may improve it 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 and compost. These additives should be mixed into the plot at least three 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 to be fertilized additional times during the growing season. Follow the recommended practices on the fertilizer bag.

Too much water can cause disease and rot in the garden. Provide sufficient drainage for excessive rainfall, while arranging for irrigation during dry periods. The frequency of irrigation depends on 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.

Keeping pests out of the garden, including weeds, can be difficult. 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 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, or the EDIS Publication below.

Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide
Interested in learning more about gardening and landscaping in Florida? The Great Gardener program is set to begin in mid-October. Classes will be on Tuesday evenings. For more information, call 321-697-3000.

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