

Magic from the Manual: Vegetable Gardening

By Lance Barthel, Greenleaf Nursery

Vegetable gardening is a major interest and hobby of the American people. Information pertaining to variety selection, planting, and culture may be requested from garden center professionals. These professionals should make suggestions for environmentally safe practices that will produce quality products. Certified Professionals, particularly those that work in garden centers, are expected to know, recognize and understand vegetables and their culture.

Site Selection

The site for a vegetable garden should be fairly level, well drained, and should not have low areas where water might stand. Most vegetables should receive a minimum of six hours of direct sun per day. Trees and shrubs decrease sunlight and compete with vegetables for water and minerals, therefore, the garden should be located a reasonable distance from trees and large flowers. Conversely, when space is limited, some brightly colored vegetables such as sweet peppers and flowering edible cabbage or kale, can be incorporated into landscape plantings.

Seeds and Seeding

Some gardeners want to save seeds from gardens, however, most of the seeds planted are hybrids, so the seed produced from these hybrid plants will not be true to the parent plant. It is very difficult to sow small seeds thinly enough to permit all plants to develop well. Early thinning is especially important in root crops such as beets, carrots, parsnips, rutabagas, and turnips.

Most vegetables fit into one of the following seven categories:

1. Leafy Crops: lettuce, spinach, swiss chard
2. Root Crops: carrots, radish, parsnips, onions
3. Cole Crops or Cabbage Family: broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower.
4. Legumes: beans, peas
5. Squash and Melons: zucchini, acorn squash, watermelon, cantaloupe
6. Tomato Family (Solanaceae): peppers, tomato, egg plant, potato
7. Corn.

When planning the vegetable garden, change the location each year where each vegetable category is grown to minimize the build-up of insects and diseases.

Some vegetables put on growth at temperatures as low as 45°F, but they grow most vigorously at temperatures between 50°F and 70°F. Plants meeting this temperature growth pattern are placed in a category referred to as “cool season vegetables”. Refer to categories 1, 2 and 3 from above as cool season vegetables.

In contrast, “warm season vegetables” need a base growth temperature of 55°F and grow most vigorously at temperatures above 70°F. Refer to categories 4, 5, 6 and 7 above as warm season vegetables.

Garden Layout

It is advisable to put a garden plan on paper. The plan should be drawn to scale showing the size of the garden, spacing between rows, row length for each crop, spacing between rows, row length for each crop, specific arrangement of crops and date of planting. Keep you plans on file for two to three years so that you can rotate for better disease control.

Nutrients

Vegetables do best with a soil pH of 6.0 to 7.0. In addition, the soil should contain plenty of readily available nutrients. Some of these nutrients can be supplied through liberal applications of rotted manure. Commercial fertilizers can also be used and will provide a more accurate application of specific nutrients without the potential of significantly increasing soluble salts.

The following is a list of terms associated with vegetable gardening

Intensive Gardening: - When space is limited, intensive vegetable gardening can be practiced for efficient use of space.

Succession Planting: - Succession planting involves following a quick maturing crop such as lettuce with a crop such as cabbage in the same area.

Intercropping: - Intercropping is accomplished by planting or seeding quick maturing crops that require narrow spacing between rows of longer-term crops that require wide spacing.

Staking or Trellis Work: - Supports are recommended for tomatoes, pole beans and vine crops. This allows vertical growth and less horizontal space will be required.

Containerized Raised Beds: - Raised beds improve yield, minimize compaction, and are easier on gardeners' backs. Extra watering may be necessary.

Container Gardening: - Patio tomatoes, bush cucumbers, lettuce, onions and herbs can be successfully grown in containers.

Study Questions:

T or F Warm season vegetables need a base growth temperature as low as 45°F.

T or F The pests that affect one member in a vegetable category are usually problems for other vegetables in the same category.

Which of the following are not considered part of the Root Crop vegetable category?

- A. Carrots
- B. Radish
- C. Potato
- D. Parsnips
- E. Onions

Answers: 1 (F), 2 (T), 3 (C)

Lance Barthel is the Chair of the MNLA Certification Committee and can be reached at Lance_Barthel@Greenleafnursery.com.