

Stretch Dollars by Growing Your Own Vegetables

by Terry Brite DelValle

Food prices are up and predicted to go higher. Prices are getting folks attention when they shop at local food stores. While manning an exhibit for students at Florida State College of Jacksonville, one of the students commented that she paid close to \$4 for 2 tomatoes. She quickly added "I plan to start growing my own to save money".

If saving money is the main reason for growing vegetables, compare the cost of produce at the store. Herbs, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and squash are more expensive than potatoes, greens and beans. Other reasons to garden are to insure food safety and the satisfaction of growing your own food. By growing your own vegetables, you control the types of pesticides that are applied.

Mid March is the time to plant warm season vegetables so get started now to beat the pests. Here are a few tips if you are new to the gardening scene.

Siting the Garden: Select a site that will receive a minimum of 6 hours of full sun. To reduce disease problems, morning sun is preferred and a little shade in the hot afternoon is not a bad thing. Water is critical to the success of the garden so position the garden close to the home near a water source. Soil should be well drained and will likely need additional organic matter. Avoid areas around trees and woody shrubs because of competition with roots.



Plan on Paper: If you're a first time gardener, keep the garden small. The average size garden is 300 to 600 square feet. Decide which vegetables you like the most and draw a garden plan on paper. Plant taller crops or plants that require a trellis on the north side while shorter crops, like squash, are planted on the south. If growing corn, plant in multiple rows or in blocks because corn is wind pollinated.

If space is an issue, interplant short and long term crops together. For example, plant lettuce at the base of corn, or snap beans with sweet potatoes. Corn can be versatile by serving as a trellis for beans or cucumbers. For a small garden, the distance required between rows is not important so just follow the space needed between plants.

Prepare the Site: The first step in preparing the site is to clear sod, weeds or any debris. Then cultivate or turn the soil to a depth of 6" to 12". At the same time, add organic matter to enrich the soil. If using composted animal manure, add 25 to 100 pounds per 100 square feet. Avoid incorporating fresh manures into the garden. Fresh manures must be composted for 90 to 120 days before planting. Compost can be substituted at the rate of 1 pound per square foot. In addition, mix in 2 pounds of a 10-10-10 or comparable fertilizer per 100 square feet. Another option is to mix in a slow-release fertilizer (like Osmocote) for vegetables to avoid having to sidedress plants throughout the growing season. Just prior to planting, rake to make sure the soil is fine and free of clumps. If drainage is a problem, make rows 12" higher than the existing soil to help the plants survive standing water.



Don't add lime without first knowing the soil pH. Take samples from several areas in the garden, mix together, and place in a pint container. If the soil is wet, air-dry the soil prior to taking it to your local County Extension Service. Vegetables like a slightly acid soil with a pH between 5.8 and 6.5.

Plant the Garden: Beans, cantaloupes, collards, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, okra, peanuts, southern peas, peppers, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, summer and winter squash, tomatoes, and watermelon can be planted through April. The easiest vegetables to grow for the beginning gardener are beans, eggplant, okra, peanuts, peppers, squash, and cucumbers. Tomatoes have many disease and insect problems but are worth the extra effort.



Some vegetables are best grown from seed whereas others should be planted as transplants. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant are best purchased as transplants. The rest can be planted from seed with the exception of sweet potatoes, which are grown from cuttings (slips). Select varieties that are good for our area. Buy disease resistant varieties, especially tomatoes. Look for the term VFN on the tag, which refers to disease and nematode resistance. If tomatoes transplants are too tall (leggy), plant them deep to develop an extensive root system and get better production. Refer to the on vegetable gardening, go to <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>.

Maintain the Garden: At planting time, side-dress with four ounces of 10-10-10 per 10' row. Apply fertilizer in bands 1" deep and 2 to 3 inches away from the seed row or plants. If you used a slow-release fertilizer like osmocote, you can skip this step.

Water new plants at short intervals, but frequently to get them established. Apply water early in the morning to reduce disease problems. Another option is to use a flat soaker hose turned upside down or a drip system to keep water off the leaves. Once plants are established, water less frequently but for longer intervals.

Apply a 2" to 3" layer of organic mulch to conserve water and reduce weeds. Pine straw, mini pine bark, or leaves (oak, maple, etc) are all good sources that can be worked into the soil after the gardening season to increase organic matter. Some gardeners lay down 2 to 4 layers of newspaper (black and white print) along the rows and then cover with an organic mulch. Plastic mulches have become popular in commercial production. Silver, aluminized or metalized plastic mulch repels aphids, thrips, and silverleaf whitefly which reduce the risk of some viruses and diseases.

Container Gardening: If you don't have the space for a traditional in-ground garden, try growing a few plants in containers. It is very easy to make or purchase a raised bed which can be as small as 4' by 4'. Large containers or grow boxes are excellent ways to grow many vegetables like tomatoes, pepper, cucumbers, or eggplants. Large containers will require less watering and so don't skimp on the size. Select a good media that holds moisture (peat) but has some bark to help with drainage in case we get heavy rains.

