

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

June is almost over and your neighbors have begun to harvest their first crops from their vegetable gardens, which they, with great foresight, planted a couple months ago. And here you sit with no fresh veggies to eat because you didn't get your garden planted in time. Is it too late to plant a nice vegetable garden?

Don't worry! In western Washington, it's almost never too late to plant a vegetable garden. Granted, it might be too late for some varieties, but there are always some shorter-season types that will produce when you start your garden a little later than you had planned. All you need to do is follow a few simple steps.

First, find a site for your garden. Look for the sunniest place you have. It is best to find a spot that gets at least eight hours of sun per day; 12 hours is ideal. Make sure you have water available and try to avoid planting near trees and shrubs, because they will shade the site and compete with your vegetables for water and nutrients. If your proposed site is one you have used for several years, try not to plant genetically related plants in the same place for more than three years in a row. If you're starting a new bed, keep track of what you plant so you can avoid planting genetically related plants in the same place for that three-year period.

Don't think your vegetable garden has to be hidden from view. It is very easy to plant a vegetable garden that not only produces great-tasting vegetables, but looks good as well. For ideas on how to create a productive, good-looking vegetable garden, visit the WSU Discovery Garden at 16602 State Route 536 in west Mount Vernon, next to the WSU Northwestern Washington Research & Extension Center. If you go the garden on Tuesday mornings, you will likely be able to discuss vegetable gardening with one of the WSU Master Gardeners as they work to maintain the garden and extend education.

Next, decide what to plant. Start by making a list of the vegetables you and your family enjoy. Remember, homegrown vegetables will taste better than what you generally purchase at the supermarkets, because the time from harvest to cooking is so much shorter. As Skagitonians, we are lucky to have many farmers' markets, roadside produce stands, and even some daily deliveries to local markets. Still, there is nothing like growing your own. Keep in mind what you generally see at the market and consider growing new, unusual, and hard-to-find varieties (mail-order seed catalogs are a great resource for rare and unique plants).

Prepare the bed for planting. It is best to have deep, well-drained soil with compost or other natural amendments added to the soil. A rototiller works great, as does a garden fork. If you till, don't overdo it; over a period of years, hardpan can develop beneath the tilled depth. If your soil is hard with clay, it might be wise to consider raised beds. If formal sides for raised beds are too costly, just mound the bed to get a raised effect. Add fertilizer just before planting; composted manure, soluble fertilizers and compost all work well.

Sow your seeds according to label instructions, and/or plant your vegetable starts. If a seed packet informs you that the sowing time is too late, buy some starter plants at nurseries, stores, or local farmers' markets. Try to get the starter plants in the ground as soon as possible. If you plant seeds, thin them as they mature to give the plants room to grow (very important with carrots, for example). If you plan to grow some plants on a trellis, such as beans, peas or cucumbers, plant them on the north end of your beds so they won't shade your shorter vegetables.

Baby your beds. Don't let your vegetable garden dry out. Make sure you have good drainage and don't let your plants stand in puddles of water. The best and most efficient irrigation system is a trickle type, such as soaker hoses, which work well and are relatively inexpensive. Drip systems put the water right at the roots and keep the tops of plants dry, which decreases the likelihood that your plants will contract disease. Overhead sprinkling is the most inefficient, but also the least expensive and most commonly used. If you use an overhead sprinkler, try to water your plants early in the day to keep the evaporation at a minimum and allow foliage to dry before nightfall. If you grow tomatoes, though, *do not water with an overhead sprinkler* because the vines must be kept as dry as possible to help avoid late-season blight.

Finally, keep your garden as free from weeds as you possibly can, and enjoy your harvest—even if it comes a little later than your neighbor's does!

Want to learn more about vegetable gardening? Helpful bulletins are available from the Washington State University Extension. Visit the WSU Publications Web site at <http://pubs.wsu.edu/>. You may also drop in our weekly clinics for one-on-one advice, or curl up with an in-depth publication such as S. Solomon's "Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades."

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.