

Thinning Vegetables in the June Garden

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Yes, thin is in.

It's June. The intense spring preparation of planning, seed selection, fertilizing, raking, staking and executing your design is complete. Beautiful seedlings and young plants are thriving abundantly in your vegetable garden. Your early special care has paid off. The work is done, and it is now time to sit back and let nature takes its course.

But wait! An important chore is left to ensure that the yield you envision now will become reality when harvest time rolls around. Yes, thin is in. Plants require a certain amount of space for optimum root expansion and foliage growth if maximum production is expected. Crowding plants limits root systems just as having weeds in the garden does.

All vegetables need the intensity of sunlight to energize the chlorophyll of cells, supply needed nutrients and water, air circulation and room to expand, especially for carrots, onions, radishes, turnips and other root crops. Both Swiss chard and beet "seeds" are actually clusters that contain several seeds that must be thinned out as well.

Generally, it is wise to sow extra seeds and, after emergence, thin them in three gradual steps over three to five weeks. During the first week some will thin themselves due to damping-off diseases or insects.

Seedlings can be transplanted at this point using a spoon to lift them from the soil. Be sure to avoid holding seedlings by their stems, as they bruise easily. Hold them by the seedling leaves, as those will drop off eventually.

Transplant on a cool, cloudy day to allow the seedlings time to adjust. Water all areas immediately, including where the seedlings were transferred from, to settle the soil.

Thinning does not have to be backbreaking. Many crops such as radishes, carrots and beets can be thinned using a garden rake. When plants are one inch tall, drag a garden rake lightly through a row or bed on the diagonal, first in one direction then the other. The teeth of the rake will uproot just enough seedlings to leave nice spacing.

When the first true leaf appears, thin to about one-half to one inch apart. By the end of two weeks the hardier seedlings will be evident and weaker ones can be eliminated. When plants have their first three sets of true leaves and are growing well, they can be thinned to the desired final spacing. If in doubt as to spacing requirements, check the seed packet, consult your seed catalog, a book or the Internet.

The ideal time for thinning is when soil is damp but not excessively wet. If the soil is dry, water the site about an hour before thinning for easy extraction.

Two plants that do not need thinning are peas and bush beans. Other beans, including pole varieties, should be thinned, preferably by clipping off the undesired plant at the soil level so that the entwining roots do not disturb neighboring plants. Check your seed packet for spacing.



Left: Overcrowded red beet seedlings will starve as they compete for growing space, light and soil nutrients. Starts removed in thinning may be transplanted to extend and increase your harvest. **Middle:** Sharp scissors in the garden can make thinning a row of crowded carrots a snap, and it leaves the ground undisturbed around the growing crop. **Right:** Thinned carrot seedlings now have plenty of space to grow. *Photos by Chris Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

But thinning can be painful. It is difficult to remove extra plants when you have worked so hard to grow them. Be brave! Tell yourself it is “for the greater good.” Some thinnings can be used in salads, such as those of lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard and beet greens.



If you really want to capitalize on your gardening investment, try transplanting the roots in a container or in another area of the garden. In the Discovery Garden we have been successful with Bibb lettuce, spinach, beets, chard and kale. Just think of these as a bonus if they take root or a failed experiment if they don't.

Remember that thinning is one of the early toils of garden preparation that will pay off later in an abundance of fresh tasting, nutritious vegetables for you and your family. You will be glad you did!

RESOURCES:

- “Home Vegetable Gardening” AG-06, Larry Bass, 1/00. North Carolina State University Extension.
- “Thinning Vegetable Seedlings”. Carol Wilson, April 30, 2009. *Front Range Food Gardener*. Colorado State University Extension (retired).
- “Get a Head Start on Spring Vegetables”. Mary Robson & Joan Helbacka, February 3, 2002. Washington State University Extension.
- “Thin Plants for a Healthy Crop”. Cass Peterson, April 1999. *Kitchen Garden Magazine*, Issue #20
- “Thinning Vegetable Seedlings”. Marie Iannotti. [About.com](http://www.About.com) Guide