

Watermelon and Asian Vegetables in the Anacortes Kids' Garden

August 8, 2008

Tired of the same old vegetables? Take a new cue from these kids!

Seeking new flavor sensations, adventurous vegetable gardeners relish the idea of growing food crops they've never tried before. Sometimes success with unfamiliar crops depends on making just a few changes in the selection and preparation of the growing area, or in the timing of seed germination and care of the plants.

At the Anacortes Kids' Garden, a youth gardening project cosponsored by WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners and Anacortes Housing Authority, the young participants like to grow one or two new vegetables each season. The organically managed garden, located on the grounds of the Anacortes Housing Authority apartments at 23rd Street and Q Avenue, has eleven raised growing beds and a storage shed. Under the guidance of WSU Master Gardeners, the kids learn to prepare the soil, plant and care for vegetables, and harvest crops. The kids and their families eat the produce and also share it with their neighbors in the apartments.



Two WSU Master Gardeners supervise a group of budding young gardeners as they plant snow peas and other seeds in one of the raised beds at the Anacortes Kids' Garden, April 3, 2008. At lower left are fava bean plants that overwintered in the garden. Photo by Cathy Carmody.



These kids have just helped to prepare and rake out the seed bed where pak choi, cabbages, broccoli and other vegetables will be planted. Photo by Cathy Carmody.

In 2006, the Kids' Garden crew planted watermelons. Melons require a long, warm growing season to produce ripe fruits, and generally are better suited to the climate conditions in the southern U.S. Aware of this, the WSU Master Gardeners pulled out a few gardening tricks to get ripe watermelons in autumn.

Here's a rundown on some of the tricks:

- Choose a variety with a shorter days-to-maturity number. This number, usually listed in seed catalogs and on seed packets, refers to the number of growing days needed to harvest a crop under optimal conditions. However, in areas with cool summers such as ours, plants may require 20 to 40 percent more days to produce mature fruit. The Kids' Garden used the icebox variety Sugar Baby, listed at 75 to 80 days to maturity.

- Select a planting area in the warmest, sunniest section of the garden. In the Kids' Garden, the Master Gardeners chose a spot facing south with full sun exposure. It also receives some reflected light and heat from the wall of a building a few feet to the north.
- Consider planting in a raised bed. Since the soil is above ground level, it warms up earlier in the spring, allowing earlier planting of tender melons. Drainage is improved in raised beds, too.
- Start seeds indoors or in a greenhouse. Seeds may be started about four to six weeks before outdoor planting time, then transplanted into the garden when soil temperature reaches 60 degrees F. (usually between late May and mid June). For the Kids' Garden, Master Gardeners planted seeds indoors in 3½-inch pots, placed them on a heating mat designed for seed starting until germination occurred, then tended the plants indoors under lights. Before outdoor planting, they hardened off the seedlings by gradually introducing them to outdoor conditions.
- Cover the soil with plastic mulch. Black or green plastic film in direct contact with the soil surface can raise the temperature of the top two inches of soil by a few degrees during the day. By excluding sunlight, it also inhibits weed germination and growth underneath. Seedlings may be planted through slits cut in the plastic.
- Protect plants with cloches or row covers if the temperature dips. These season-extending covers help trap warm air around plants. They come in handy during late spring and early summer when nights (and sometimes days) are still cool. Remove the covers on warm, sunny days.



By using a few season-extending gardening tricks, the Anacortes Kids' Garden gardeners were able to harvest ripe watermelons in 2006. Tomato plants grow in the background. Photo by Cathy Carmody.



Tender pak choi greens growing in the Anacortes Kids' Garden, early July 2008. The flower buds emerging in the centers of the plants also are edible. Photo by Cathy Carmody.

Besides trying new crops, the Kids' Garden also relies on tried-and-true favorites. There's always a selection of Asian greens and vegetables, including pak choi (bok choy), Chinese cabbage, daikon radish, snow peas and Chinese parsley (cilantro). The kids direct-seed these cool-season crops from early to mid April. They begin to harvest the greens and radishes in mid to late spring. Snow peas are usually ready to pick in early summer.

Some of the cool-season Asian vegetables may be planted again for harvest in fall and winter. For more information, refer to WSU Extension publication PNW 548, "Fall and Winter Vegetable Gardening in the Pacific Northwest."

The larval stages of several insect pests can infest pak choi, Chinese cabbage and daikon radishes. To exclude the adult insects that lay their eggs on or around plants, the Master Gardeners protect crops with

porous row covers (Reemay is one brand name) that they drape over a framework of PVC pipe. The arches of PVC fit over lengths of rebar that are driven into the soil, and plastic clips secure the row covers to the framework.



Plastic clips like this one secure row cover fabric to a framework made of PVC pipe. The clips come in two sizes to fit either 1/2-inch or 3/4-inch pipe, and are available at some gardening centers, nurseries and mail-order suppliers. Photo by Cathy Carmody.



Arches made of PVC pipe support row cover fabric, which protects cabbage family crops from damage by the larval stages of several insect pests. Here, the row cover is folded back to show cabbage plants in the foreground, and behind it pak choi that is sending up flower stalks in mid-July. Photo by Cathy Carmody.

Other Extension publications of interest on this topic are EB0422, “Home Gardens”; EB1414, “Caterpillar Pests of the Cabbage Family”; and EB0859E, “The Cabbage Maggot in the Home Garden.” They are available at the WSU Skagit County Extension office, or online at <http://pubs.wsu.edu>.

NEW CROPS WORKSHOP

- **What:** “New crops and how to grow them in your home garden” — a free WSU Know & Grow workshop, explains how to make the most of microclimates, extend your growing season, and get started with sustainable and organic vegetable gardening. The session also addresses growing Asian vegetables and watermelons in the Pacific Northwest. Presented by WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, in partnership with the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center.
- **When:** 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, August 19
- **Where:** WSU-Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, 16650 Highway 536, west of Mount Vernon
- **Speaker:** Dr. Carol Miles, WSU vegetable horticulturist
- **Learn more:** To suggest an idea or topic for a future WSU Know & Grow workshop, call 360-428-4270.