

PLANTING THE VEGETABLE GARDEN

By Kathy Wolfe
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Earlier preparations lead to a productive harvest

We have come to the final article in this series on vegetable gardening. If you have been following along, you have selected seeds that will produce well in your garden, sited and laid out your garden plan and planting calendar, gotten your soil tested and prepped in accordance with your test **results**, taken seed inventory and tested leftover seed for viability. You have weeded and pre-warmed your soil and perhaps started some seeds indoors or direct seeded outdoors. Congratulations! You are well on your way to a productive harvest.

By April, hardy leafy greens, spring peas, potatoes and members of the following families can be direct sown in your garden:

Onion family: onions, leeks, chives

Carrot family: cilantro, dill, fennel, parsnips, parsley

Mustard family: arugula, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kohlrabi, radishes, kale, turnips and Oriental greens

Beet family: beets, spinach, Swiss chard, quinoa

Soil temperature affects seed germination speed, so don't jump the gun if the weather is still cold. Check the Web, County Extension publications or reliable gardening sources for charts showing minimum soil temperatures needed for vegetable growth. Many seeds rot in spring before they have a chance to sprout, so be aware of soil saturation and weather forecasts.

Floating row covers (fabric sheets placed over plants that allow light and water in but keep insects out) are a useful deterrent to cabbage root and carrot rust fly. They can also provide a few degrees of frost protection. Leave plenty of slack in the material to allow for growth but bury the edges in soil or use another method to keep pests out. Do not leave covers on plants that need pollination, such as squash.

Keep a close watch out for slugs. They love those baby vegetable starts! Clear out areas where they hide and go slug hunting at night or very early in the morning. Frequent cultivation also exposes juveniles and damages eggs. You might try baiting with beer and cleaning out your trap on a daily basis. A 3-inch wide copper strip set up vertically like a fenced enclosure can be an effective barrier. Iron phosphate products (e.g. Sluggo®) can also be used, being careful to follow label instructions carefully.

Plants that have been raised indoors must be slowly acclimated to the outdoors or hardened off. Because winds can dry young leaves, sun can scorch them and cool temperatures can slow or stunt their growth, it is important to gradually expose them to the elements to help them get off to a successful start.



Left: Master Gardener Priscilla Gillete checks greenhouse-raised plants, which must be slowly acclimated to the outdoors, or hardened off, prior to planting in the garden. **Right:** Master Gardeners Raoul and Nurith St. Pierre of Samish Island volunteer their time and expertise in the greenhouse to raise thousands of healthy vegetable starts for spring planting. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

Plants have various hardening off needs. Cold frames and cloches can aid the transition of tender plants such as peppers, tomatoes and eggplant. If these are not available, find a garden spot with good sunshine but protection from harsh wind and rain.

Half-hardy plants can be hardened off in April, tender plants starting in May, but outdoor planting may need to be delayed until June. The plants will catch up quickly once planted if you don't rush the hardening off process.

Our next step is transplanting. Shady days, late afternoon or early evening are good times so that plants will avoid wilting. Water the plant before gently removing it from the pot and checking for matted roots. Set the plant down and slowly, using a small fork, tease the roots away from each other. Try not to bruise the stem by grabbing and tugging.

Dig a hole wider and slightly deeper than the root ball. You may want to add a starter solution of half-strength fertilizer to the hole. Plant them into the ground at the same height as they grew in the container. (Tomato plants are the exception here, as their bottom leaves can be removed and planted deeply in the hole to form a longer, more stable root system.)

Space plants in accordance with your final plant spacing. Crowding only leads to stunted growth or puny plants. Water well. You may want to protect them for a few days with a floating row cover or vented cloche.

As direct seeded crops emerge, you may find the spacing between plants is too close. Starts must be thinned to maximize growth and health. Thin in gradual steps over a three- to five-week period to ensure against low germination, bad weather, insects, slugs and disease attacks.

If seeds are very close together, you might want to use small scissors to cut off the "crowder" rather than tugging and disturbing the "keeper's" roots. You will be glad you took time now to thin because plants will be more robust at harvest. Happy plants make happy gardeners!

Follow the plan you made earlier in the year for intercropping, succession planting and vegetable crop rotation. All of these involve the mix of plants, timing of plantings and garden spacing.

By late June, summer vegetables should be growing strongly, and it is time to start the fall/winter garden. Many crops can be directly planted as space becomes available; or you can dedicate a nursery bed or flat to start seeds to be transplanted later.

In late August, plant fall greens for harvest until the first November frost hits. In September a salad can be sown under cloches to take your greens even later. Add flowers throughout your garden to promote pollinators and make you smile.

As you move through the gardening year, pay close attention to maintenance issues such as continued weeding so plants are not robbed of water, nutrients and light; adding mulch to improve humus and nutrients in the soil; fertilizing appropriately to supply the many minerals needed for proper vegetable growth (avoiding excess nitrogen, because it promotes growth over fruiting); watching for insects and knowing which ones are harmful and which are beneficial before taking action; and keeping an eye out for diseases such as powdery mildew and the dreaded tomato late blight.

Most importantly, get out and enjoy connecting with your own natural paradise!



Left: One method of transplanting plants with small seeds, such as kale or lettuce, is to use a teaspoon to separate and lift the seedlings when they have sprouted their first true leaves. **Right:** Winds can dry young leaves, sun can scorch them and cool temperatures can slow or stunt their growth. It is important to gradually expose tender plants to the elements, a process called hardening-off, to help them get off to a successful start. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

- *The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide*. Seattle Tilth. 2005.
- “Vegetable Garden Timetable.” Travis Saling, *The Westside Gardener*. Updated November 18, 2013.
- “Short Season Vegetable Gardening.” JoAnn Robbins and Wm. Michael Colt. A Pacific Northwest Extension Publication. Published December 1996; reprinted November 2000.
- “Less Toxic Iron Phosphate Slug Bait Proves Effective.” Carol Savonen (author), Glenn Fisher (source). Oregon State Extension Service. February 25, 2008.
- “Slug Control.” Amy J. Dreves, Nicole Anderson and Glenn Fisher. *Pacific Northwest Insect Management Handbook*. March 2014.
- “Vegetable Garden Planting Strategies.” Grow It Organically! Steve Masley.
- “Planting Chart for Coastal B.C.” West Coast Seeds.