

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Whether spring slipped by before the vegetable garden got planted, or the vision of fresh lettuce in December inspires midsummer action, opportunities abound in our kind Pacific Northwest environment. Planning ahead will save work and enhance yields. Plant only what your family will eat, plus whatever you want to contribute to the local food bank. Vegetables are more nutritious and taste best when they move the shortest distance and time from the garden to the stove or table. Money can be saved by raising veggies that tend to be pricey at the grocery store, especially when they are bought off-season.

The best place for the garden is on a sunny, gentle slope that is not too windy, and is close to a water source as well as the tool shed (garage). The soil must be well-drained, loose enough to include some air, but dense enough to hold some water. Fertility and texture may be improved by the addition of organic compost, balanced fertilizer, and sand.

To minimize soil-borne diseases that damage plants, it is important to avoid planting members of the same plant family in the same place year after year. An example of a 5-year rotation would be: In 2006, carrot, dill, parsley family; 2007, lettuce, endive; 2008, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and other Brassica family members; 2009, beet, chard, spinach family; 2010, cucumber, squash family. Other popular families are the bean, pea (legume); onion, garlic, chive; corn; tomato, pepper, potato.

Vegetables that grow well during the cool fall season can be planted in midsummer. Root crops such as beets, carrots, evergreen bunching onions, leeks, rutabagas and turnips store conveniently in the ground. Chard, kohlrabi, kale, spinach, beet greens parsley, and lettuce can often be picked well into the winter. Cabbage, depending on variety, may be planted in summer and harvested in late fall, winter, and spring. Because bush beans grow faster in the hottest months, they can usually be planted in July and produce a crop before frost.

Various aids such as row covers, cloches, cold frames, hotbeds and greenhouses can extend the season as well as the variety of vegetables in the winter garden. They can be as simple as a plastic jug with the bottom cut out, or as elaborate as a fancy greenhouse. Frames made of flexible pipe or reinforcing wire can be covered with plastic or row cover material to provide protection from excessive wind and rain.

Seeds to plant in July include beets, broccoli, extra early cabbage, carrots, Chinese cabbage, collards, endive, kale, kohlrabi, rutabagas, scallions, and Swiss chard. In August, seeds of arugula, mustard, spinach, turnips and lettuce, as well as transplants of broccoli, Brussels sprouts, early cabbage, cauliflower and Chinese cabbage may be set out. In September you can plant arugula, carrots, peas, fava beans, lettuce and radishes. Garlic is planted in October. If cole crops (cabbage family) are stressed by lack of moisture or low fertility at any time during their growth period they will likely go to seed instead of producing a crop.

Further information is available at the website: <http://gardening.wsu.edu>. Washington State University Extension Bulletins #0422 "Home Gardens" and #0648 "Organic Gardening" are available through the Skagit County Extension Office or on the website at <http://gardening.wsu.edu/text/veges.htm>.

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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.