

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #36 Growing Vegetables for African American Cooking

Healthy Choices

Let's start with a quote from *Down Home Healthy*, a publication of the National Institutes of Health and the National Cancer Institute. "Statistics tell us that black folks have a higher than average risk of getting heart disease, cancer and other diet-related diseases. Now that's bad news. But those same health professionals tell us there's something we can do to help change that, and that's the good news. We can eat right. And that doesn't mean giving up our wonderful "soul food." Not at all. By making the right food choices, we can reduce the risk of getting those diseases."

The purpose of this fact sheet is to teach about food you can grow in your garden. Our Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #2 lists the most nutritious vegetables. At the very top of those lists are:

Collard greens	Sweet potatoes
Shelled beans	Carrots
Peas	Spinach
Red bell peppers	Turnip greens

Can you see why many traditional African-American dishes could be considered health food? I don't know of any other ethnic cuisine that uses all or most of these vegetables.

Growing Heat-loving Vegetables

Unfortunately, some vegetables important to African-American cuisine are hard to grow in the cool maritime Northwest. Many traditional recipes were developed in the Deep South or even the Caribbean. Some of the vegetables used, such as tomatoes, peppers, sweet potatoes and okra, grow best in climates with long, hot summers. With careful planning, proper cultivation and good summer weather, good Puget Sound area gardeners often get a reasonable harvest of many of these crops.

Here are tips that can help you be successful with these crops.

- * Choose a variety that matures as early as possible. 'Early Girl', 'Oregon Spring', 'Early Cascade' and 'Juliet' are dependable tomatoes. Favorite peppers include 'Gypsy' (sweet), 'Surefire' and "Hungarian Hot Wax'.

Look for sweet potato and okra cultivars that claim to do well in northern gardens. (These two crops are not for beginners. Even early varieties, grown by experienced gardeners, will do poorly when we have a cool summer.)

- * Start the seed (or cuttings) indoors under artificial lights to give them an

earlier start. (See fact sheet #7 for information on growing transplants.)

★ In mid-May, harden them off for about 7 – 10 days. Take them outside to a protected location during the day and bring them in at night. Then leave them out for about another week before planting out permanently. (This allows you to bring them back inside at night, if the weather turns cold again.)

★ Choose a spot to plant your starts that gets full sun. Raised beds or containers will usually be warmer. A spot in front of a south or west wall that can reflect heat is perfect. Plantings near or on a concrete or asphalt sidewalk, driveway, or patio will also benefit from reflected heat.

★ Plant in well-prepared soil with lots of added compost. Covering the soil with black plastic or landscape fabric for several weeks before planting will warm the soil up. You can make holes and plant right through the black mulch.

★ Then cover your crop with a cold frame or plastic tunnel to heat the air around the plant. (See fact sheet #41 for more information on using plastic to protect plants.)

Tomatoes in the Northwest are subject to a disease called late blight that often ruins the entire crop. The best way to protect your plants is to keep the foliage as dry as possible. More information about preventing this disease can be found in Fact Sheet # 37 “Tomato Problems.”

Other Vegetables

Since I’ve admitted that our climate isn’t well suited to some vegetables, I have to brag that it is ideal for others.

Greens grow like crazy here. You can get multiple pickings of collards and several crops of mustard and turnip greens. Also, most greens withstand our mild winters; crops planted in late summer can be harvested in winter, when fresh vegetables are expensive.

Most of these greens, as well as broccoli, cabbage and radishes are in the cabbage family. This group of veggies can get club root disease and several insects. It is important that you lime our normally acidic native soils and don’t plant these crops more often than once each three years in a given spot. Using floating row covers over your crop can prevent the common insect pests: cabbage maggot, imported cabbage worm and flea beetles. (See Fact Sheet 13 “Organic Pest Control.”)

Snap beans do very well here too. An excellent crop for beginning gardeners, they are productive and mostly pest-free. Dry beans are a little harder, since our fall rains come about the time you are trying to get the pods to dry on the vines. Although I purchase most of my dry beans, I do let the last of my runner beans dry and usually get a couple of pounds of dry beans from these ‘dual-purpose’ beans.

Keeping the Veggies Good for You

Once you have that nutritious, homegrown produce, don’t spoil it. If you cook them with meat, choose leaner cuts. Substitute vegetable oil for lard, butter or other fats that are hard at room temperature.