

Vegetable Gardening

There are lots of reasons why you should grow your own vegetables, but the best reasons are that they taste better, are fresher, and you know how organically they've been grown. With the possible exception of corn, vegetables aren't native plants and so they are not adapted to the native soil.

The first step is to locate the beds. The "books" all say vegetables need 6 or more hours of sun, but then they don't live in New Mexico at 6000 feet. For us, the east side of the house with shade from the afternoon sun is the best place to locate our vegetable bed. The width of the bed should be no wider than twice your reach. If the bed is rectangular, you should be able to reach halfway across the bed to work it. Never, never step into the bed since this compacts the soil. Long time gardeners freak when someone steps into a vegetable bed. And stepping on wet soil compacts it even more. This takes out all the air spaces growing plants need.

The next step is soil improvement. You can do this by blending compost and a little manure then mixing it into our soil creating squares or rectangles or by building raised (or lowered) beds and supplying your own soil mix. Always be careful how much manure you add because manures contain salt to which some vegetables are sensitive. All manures should be composted. Depending on the source, some manures may contain lots of weed seeds too – the gift that keeps on giving. And avoid using peat moss because it initially repels water and it takes lots of water to make it wet, then as it dries out (frequently in NM) it pulls moisture from the plants. In addition, by not buying peat moss you'll save a bog somewhere in Canada! You may also want to add a little elemental sulfur into this soil mix as well. This won't significantly acidify our alkaline soil, but it will help a little. The *Epsom salts* allow some plants to take in nutrients that are tied up by alkaline soil.

Watering – how will you do it? I suggest one of two methods: either low pressure spray (part of a drip system) or soaker hose. Spray is better at covering the whole bed, but clogs. A soaker hose needs the plants near the hose and may collect salts in the soil or plug the hose with calcium. Automated systems are better than hand watering because they're more consistent in when and for how long they water. Be sure to water in the morning so the sun can dry the plant leaves. This reduces the chance for fungal damage. Set the automated system so you can see it run (for geysers) and monitor it based on weather conditions, i.e. don't run it after a heavy rain. Depending on where you placed the bed you may also need some wind protection. For tomato plants, I wrap the cages with white plastic (tall kitchen trash bags) and I don't remove it until the plants are about 2 feet tall. You may need to include a small collar (cut the bottom off a plastic cup) which you place around the stem at ground level to keep cutworms from chewing through your tomato seedlings.

Now that we have our bed and our soil, what can we plant? There are cool season crops which can tolerate light freezes and warm season crops. Cool season crops can be mulched heavily and may allow you to harvest into spring. Lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower, root crops (carrots, beets, radishes), greens, and peas are examples of cool season crops. These get planted early in the spring or late in the summer. My feeling is that late summer planting is better than spring for cool season crops because the

seed germinates when it's warm and you harvest them when it's cool. Warm season crops need to be planted after the last freeze – which is typically around the last week of April. Examples of warm season crops include tomatoes, peppers, beans, corn, cucumbers, summer squash, melons (not pumpkin), and okra. Warm season crops should be mulched after germination to conserve moisture and moderate soil temperature.

Using seed is an obvious choice if you're willing to wait the time it takes for seed to germinate. Germination is controlled by soil temperature so you need to wait until the soil warms to directly seed into the soil. With seed you get the broadest choice of varieties – yellow or orange beets and green or purple tomatoes for example. There are wonderful varieties of lettuces that you can seed as well. All seed packets assume you're going to plant in rows. I don't plant in rows – I plant in blocks - so I clear off the top layer of soil, spread a layer of seed, and then cover with soil to the depth the package says. This requires more thinning after germination, but makes better use of space. Some plants like squash or melons require hills of soil. Some like leeks need the soil mounded around them. I generally plant lettuce, spinach, corn, carrots, radishes, peas, green onions, okra, and squash from seed. Actually to be truthful, I let Schwebach Farms plant my corn since it takes up so much space and they do it so much better. Some varieties do better in Albuquerque than others. Catalogs and the Internet are some good sources of seeds. Or e-mail me if you want some specific suggestions.

If you don't want to wait for germination, then use transplants. Note that with transplants unless you propagated the seeds yourself, the choice of varieties at the nursery will be limited. With transplants you plant about two weeks later than the seed packet says. You dig a hole the size of the pot, drop in the plant (cutting roots on the sides if the plant is pot-bound), cover the top with soil, water it in, and that's it. Here the spacing between plants is important. This information is typically on the label. Plants usually transplanted include tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, melons, broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower. Potatoes are usually planted from seed potatoes – not the ones at the store. Onions are usually planted from sets – groups of little onion plants. Garlic is planted in the fall from cloves. Tomato transplants have one lucky feature. You can plant the stem under the ground and it generates roots. This is the solution for “leggy” tomato plants.

One final suggestion is to lay out your crops in the bed so tall ones shade shorter ones. And keep replanting as you harvest or plant varieties with different maturity dates so you'll have a season of carrots not just one week.

So now I hope you start a vegetable garden, are successful, and don't forget to let me know when it's time to harvest. Sharing the harvest makes for good neighbors!

Good books for vegetable information include the Master Gardeners *Down to Earth*, and either the Ortho or Sunset book on Vegetables.