

Start preparing now for planting vegetables

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Jim Kirschke *

Spring is the gardener's favorite time of year. The weather is suited to outdoor activity, rain is more frequent, and the natural landscape is bursting into bloom. Getting started on your vegetable garden now will help beat the heat stress on both plants and yourself that will occur by mid- to late summer.

Deciding on just when to plant vegetables presents a challenge. Too early and you risk losing your plants to a late spring freeze; too late puts your vegetables at risk of insects and disease before you harvest. The choice is always a bit of a gamble.

Some gardeners choose the spring equinox, which occurs on March 21 this year, as the earliest planting date for warm-season vegetables such as tomatoes, snap beans, corn and squash. Some prefer the first full moon after the middle of March - a few days earlier, on Tuesday.

As a reference point, the average date for the last killing frost in the Tallahassee area is March 20. However, freezing temperatures have been recorded as late as mid-April.

I have one gardening friend who likes to take a chance and plant around St. Patrick's Day, which is Monday. Another more conservative friend will usually wait a month until Good Friday on April 18. I have planted the last week in March and had reasonably good luck.

Carrots, beets, lettuce, onions, potatoes and other cool-season plants should be planted earlier in March.

Whenever you decide to plant, get ready now. Choose your site carefully. Most vegetables need full sun all day. Stay away from trees and large shrubs: They will shade your garden and compete for food and water.

Cultivate your garden about three weeks before you plant. Add well-composted organic matter to improve the soil. Do not add lime unless you have had your soil tested and the pH is too low. It is too late now to get test results before planting.

If your soil is not very high in organic matter, you will need to add some fertilizer about a week before planting. A commercial grade such as 8-8-8 spread over the garden at a rate of three pounds per 100 square feet is recommended for vegetable crops.

At planting time, you should fertilize again. Use a band of 1 to 2 pounds per 100 linear feet down each side of the row or around individual plants. Keep the fertilizer about 3 inches away from the base of the plants.

If you are planting seeds directly into the garden, be aware of the weather anticipated over the following week or two. Seeds do not germinate well in cold ground and may be attacked by fungus if the soil is cold and damp. You can buy treated seeds in most farm and garden stores.

Your best chance of success with crops such as tomatoes, eggplant, peppers and squash is with transplants. They are readily available in garden stores. When buying plants, choose only proven, healthy, disease-resistant varieties.

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