Get Ready Here Comes Spring

Guest Article for the Tallahassee Democrat

Photo by Trevor Hylton, Orange Avenue Community Garden

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By Trevor Hylton

With rising food prices and the difficulty of finding some of your favorite vegetables, you may prefer to grow your own.

By choosing the correct vegetables to grow and getting an early start you can get a head start on the high temps and the insects and diseases. Now is the perfect time to begin preparations for your garden because in this area most serious gardeners start planting spring crops around mid March, but with the warm weather we have been experiencing, some people have even started planting tomatoes already.
If you were composting in the fall and practicing good compost management, you should have fully composted material that is ready to be incorporated into your soil for your spring garden. Compost will help promote nutrient development and soil aggregation while trapping moisture in the soil.

If you already started your seeds indoors, keep in mind it takes six to eight weeks until they are hardened and ready to be set in the garden. If you opt to purchase seedling there will be many available in the next few weeks.

Now is a good time to start your garden plan by reflecting on the crops you planted last spring and put in action a good crop rotation strategy. You should not plant the same crop in the same spot season after season. As a matter of fact you should try to avoid following crops that are in the same family, for example, do not follow a crop of tomatoes with a crop of peppers since both belong to the solonacea family. Your county extension office can help you plan your crop rotation and provide crop planting guide for your area.

What you plant is up to you but if you have limited space plant the crops that will maximize your output. Do not plant a crop like corn which produce a single ear. Instead consider bell pepper which will continue producing until the first frost. If you have poor soil, consider planting in containers or raised beds using a mixture of compost manures and top soil.

Once you have your plants growing you will need to be dutiful in keeping insects from destroying your crop. This can sometimes be achieved without the use of toxic chemicals. There are a number of effective pesticides that are made from natural occurring substances that has low impact on the environment. Vigilant scouting and the use of exclusionary barriers along with resistant varieties will go a long way in your pest control.

As your crops grow you may need to add fertilizer to help your plants reach their maximum development. Plants can only take up fertilizer in an inorganic form so if you use organic fertilizers, microbes will convert it to a usable form. Some critical times to fertilize are; at the time of flowering, root enlargement, or fruiting. Always remember to water your plants whenever you fertilize.

The addition of organic mulch will help to suppress weeds, regulate soil temperature, lock moisture in the soil, reduce erosion and help keep fruits clean.

If all works well you should be enjoying your bountiful harvest in a few months.

Trevor Hylton is an Extension Agent with Florida A&M University and University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon and Wakulla Counties. For more information about gardening in our area, visit the UF/ IFAS Leon County Extension website at http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu. For gardening questions, email us at Ask-A-Mastergardener@leoncountyfl.gov

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