



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Summer vegetable tips

Last month's column focused on tomatoes. How about other vegetables for summer gardens? Right now is the prime time for planting.

So here are some quick pointers, in general and for each type.

- Vegetables and herbs like full sun all day.
- Mix in starter fertilizer when you plant. We don't need any special soil conditioners here.
- Organic material makes the soil looser, and helps seeds germinate faster.
- Put in a simple watering system such as a drip irrigation line.
- Make paths using landscape fabric or bark, and spread mulch on open soil areas to prevent weeds and conserve water. Summer weeds grow fast! Hoe or smother the young seedlings in June to prevent an overgrown mess in August.
- Soak everything very thoroughly when you first plant, and then water again every few days (exactly how often and how long will depend on your soil type).
- Provide structures for the vegetables that grow on vines, as described below.
- Summer vegetable harvest begins in mid-July and continues nearly until frost.

Beans

Green beans grow on vigorous twining vines. They begin producing about 8 weeks after planting and continue all summer so long as you keep them picked. Some varieties are heat sensitive, with flowers dropping off in high temperatures. We don't recommend Kentucky Wonder for this area, prefer Blue Lake and others instead.

"Bush" (short-vine) versions of some types have been developed. These are sprawling plants to about 3 feet that produce one large crop all at once. Just stick them in odd corners of the garden and cut them off when they're done, but keep planting them into late July for sequential harvests.

Beans get mites and whiteflies late in the season. Those don't appreciably affect the yield, so in our area you can just blast them off with water every few days to manage them.

Corn

Corn plants grow fast, use lots of water and nitrogen, and produce 1 to 2 ears per plant about 3 months after you plant them. Plant seed or seedlings every 3 to 4 weeks all the way into late July, in blocks 3 to 4 rows deep to ensure proper pollination as the pollen blows down from the tassels to the ears. A single long row won't pollinate properly and the kernels will be sparsely filled in the ears.

Considering that you only get one ear per square foot, corn is not the most space-efficient thing to grow. But it's worth it if you have room, since fresh-picked corn is unbelievably sweet. Corn can also be a useful part of a crop rotation to reduce soil diseases and pests in beds where you grow tomatoes in alternate years.



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Corn earworm will happen: each ear is likely to have a caterpillar tunneling into the end. I just cut those off right out in the garden.

Modern corn varieties have more sugar than older types, and the sugar converts to starch more slowly. Some say they've lost that 'true corn' flavor. Try some Golden Bantam, some tender white corn variety, and any new extra-sweet hybrid, and see for yourself.

Always isolate popcorn, ornamental corn, and field corn from sweet corn, or you'll have a rather chewy surprise.

Peppers and eggplant

Conditions for peppers and eggplant are the same: warm soil, even moisture, some kind of slow-release fertilizer (or feed again mid-summer if you use fast-acting plant food). Stake or cage them to keep them from sprawling.

The most common mistake is planting too early. Night and soil temperatures are just now getting to the optimal range. I find a second feeding mid-summer helps increase the late season harvest.

Cucumbers, melons, pumpkins and squash are all related. In fact, some of them can hybridize. So it's not a great idea to save your own seed if you're growing them together in your garden. But that doesn't affect the fruit that you eat, just the seed for next year.

Cucumbers

Vines that cling by tendrils to whatever they can grab. Guide them to keep them climbing on the structure you provide or they'll just run out into the garden.

First issue: regular green cucumbers are often bitter here. Usually attributed to watering stress, I find it correlates more with spells of high temperatures.

Bitterness is less common in other types: lemon, burpless, and Persian cucumbers are my mainstays now.

Armenian cucumber is never bitter. It's also not really an actual cucumber, but kind of tastes like one. Huge fruit if they get away from you.

Cucumbers give a very long season of production. Like beans, they can be hosts to late-summer whiteflies and mites. By that time, your yield is declining and you can just pull them out and compost them.

Melons

Melon vines grow across the ground and take a LOT of space. They love heat and deep watering. Landscape fabric or a bed of straw is very useful to keep the fruit up off the ground and avoid pest damage as it ripens. Melons have very few pest problems here.

For watermelons, mark your calendar when you plant them, and follow the 'days to harvest' carefully. They will start to look ripe 2 to 3 weeks before they really are, and you'll be disappointed if you pick them early. They have the lowest-growing foliage and don't yield well if crowded by other melons or by weeds.

Cantaloupes are probably the most productive melons per square foot. Ambrosia is the gold standard for flavor and tender flesh. Check DAILY as it starts to ripen,



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as it goes by very fast and splits and spoils. Some tougher-skinned melons, if you have room, can be good insurance.

Pumpkins and winter squash

The vines run across the ground, covering many, many feet of space and requiring lots of water. Plant a pumpkin in the back of the vegetable bed and let it run out into the lawn or garden border.

It's ok to plant late: commercial pumpkins are seeded about July 1 for the Jack o Lantern trade. 'Sugar' is a pie pumpkin that's worth growing for the fine-textured flesh and very sweet flavor.

Winter squash are types that we grow in summer and store to eat in the winter: butternut, acorn, Hubbard, etc.

Growing giant pumpkins is a whole 'nother discussion. See my article from August 2007 (http://redwoodbarn.com/DE_giantvegetables.htm).

Squash, summer

Summer squash vines tend to be shorter than winter squashes and melons. Each plant usually takes up about 3 to 4 feet of space. Zucchini stops setting fruit during the hottest weather, then makes up for it with an abundant crop as the days get shorter. Other summer squashes such as pattypan and crookneck are more consistent.

Sunburst is one of my favorites: a bright yellow pattypan that stays tender even when it gets pretty big. And if you let it get really big, it's a very cool spaceship looking thing for fall decorations.

Other summer specialties:

Basil

Basil loves heat and sunshine, although plants can grow acceptably in lower light. Everyone tells you to keep them from flowering, since the tender new growth tastes the best. But bees love the blooms! So they're a great way to draw pollinators into your garden. You can keep pinching the plant to try to prevent blossoms – or just plant more every few weeks. I like to put in one more batch of plants in September for fall and winter use (via drying and freezing).

There are lots of types. Dwarf basil is used even when flowering and can be easily grown in a pot. Anise, lemon, and cinnamon basil smell great, but most people don't use them all that much. Red-leaf basil is very pretty, especially good for mixing in containers with flowers. Cooks prefer sweet basil, Genovese, large-leaf, or Italian, or Thai basil for special recipes.

Okra

Loves heat! Don't even think of planting it early! The flowers are pretty, the plant is upright and easy to grow, and the pod is slimy when cooked. Definitely an acquired taste, but a very ornamental plant even if you don't eat it. A couple of plants will give



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you enough to sample. If you really like okra, you'll need to plant 5 to 6 plants. Pick daily as the pods enlarge very rapidly.

Sweet potatoes

Rampant vines in the morning glory family, sweet potatoes have lush foliage and run all over the place if you don't provide a trellis or support. They need plenty of water. Other than that, mostly it's a matter of finding the starts (not many nurseries have them), monitoring the vines to keep them under control, and digging up the roots before frost.

Not usually planted now:

Potatoes

Usually planted in early spring here, some people plant potatoes mid-summer to get small, sweet "new potatoes" for the Thanksgiving dinner table. They need loose soil, plenty of moisture during early growth stages, and moderate but not excessive fertilizer.

What about the root vegetables? *Beets? Carrots? Radishes? Turnips?*

Better planted in fall. They tend to be pithier in hot weather, sweeter and more tender when it's cool.

Any *greens* we can plant now? How about kale?

Cool season only. Swiss chard is pretty much it for greens here in the summer.

And how about *cilantro*?

Cilantro only likes mild weather, so it is best planted in September or February.



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Worth it if you have the space, corn grows quickly and tastes extra-sweet when picked just before you cook it! Plant in blocks for proper wind pollination, and do successive plantings every few weeks into mid-July.



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A harvest of Persian cucumbers from just four plants in July! Pick them young and they keep coming for 6 to 8 weeks. Persian cucumbers are sweeter and less likely to be bitter than traditional green cucumbers.



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A family favorite, Sunburst squash is a bright yellow pattypan type. It stays firm for cooking even when it gets pretty large. By the end of the season you'll probably let a few grow even bigger for dramatic autumn harvest decorations.



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Harvest from just two little plants set out in mid-July. Pumpkins do take a lot of space, but are easy and fun to grow.



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Another use for pumpkins? You can find lots of recipes that use pumpkin blossoms: stuffed, baked, fried, even in risotto.



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The flavor standard to which all other cantaloupes are compared. Ambrosia melon is soft and incredibly sweet. The thin skin requires vigilance: check daily for ripe fruit, as they go quickly.