



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Victory Gardens Return

April 13, 2020

In turbulent times, people want agency over their own food supply.

“My wife said maybe we need to plant a vegetable garden this year.”

A tidal wave of demand swept over garden supply stores in the last three weeks, as gardeners new and old turn to one thing that provides a measure of personal comfort and security: digging in the dirt, growing your own food, and taking a few minutes each day to look at some flowers.

It may be hard for people who don't garden to put all of that context into a little tomato plant. For gardeners, it's not at all far-fetched. To me, the greatest expression of hope is a four-inch tall tomato plant in a six-foot tall cage. That's a sign of an optimistic gardener who is already thinking of sauces, salsas, and sandwiches.

There's also the fact that people are cooped up in their houses, getting on each other's nerves, and running out of things to do. An hour in the garden alone might just save some relationships.

Some early shoppers were worried that vegetable plants won't be available later in the season due to all this early demand.

So let's address that first.

The stay-at-home rules did cause disruptions in the supply chain for plant materials. Some growers shut down initially, and many are operating with reduced staffing. Seed brokers are running out of inventory.

Once it was established that garden supply stores are essential businesses (providing materials “for food production for personal consumption”), deliveries resumed. Early high demand might lead to spot shortages of varieties, since it takes growers several weeks to get finished product from seed. Crop cycles are faster for tomatoes, slower for peppers and eggplant, very fast for squash and melons and cukes and beans.

Good news: growers are planting like crazy and there's plenty of time. Common hybrids and familiar heirlooms should be in good supply. For more obscure varieties, planted by growers in smaller batches, you might want to grab them when you see them. For example, the Wild Boar Farms tomatoes, originated locally by farmer Brad Gates, are mostly delivered only at the start of the season.

Some basics for beginning gardeners.

Our region and gardening seasons:

- We live in a hot, dry-summer climate with a long growing season, April through October for summer vegetables.



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- Our soils are mineral, with very little organic material. They have most nutrients that plants need and hold them well. We don't need to fertilize much here.
- We have two distinct growing seasons in the vegetable garden. Those that grow well in the hot weather (tomatoes, peppers, melons, etc.) we plant from April into July, and harvest all through summer and fall.
- There are plants that grow well in fall and winter (broccoli, cabbage, lettuce, kale, peas, etc.), which don't tolerate heat. We plant those September through February.
- You provide all of the water your vegetable garden gets in the summer. A growing vegetable plant needs a surprising amount of water. Correct watering is really the key to successful gardening here.

Where?

The sunniest part of your yard is best: at least four to six hours of sun minimum. Full sun (eight hours +) is best.

When?

"Isn't it early to be planting these?"

Yes. For best results, we plant tomatoes in April, peppers and eggplant in May. Other summer vegetables fall along that timeline.

Planting in March wasn't optimal, but people weren't going to be deterred. If your seedlings languish, give them a boost with some fertilizer as soon as the nights get into the mid-50's. The real heat lovers – okra, watermelons, and the super-hot peppers such as habañero – should not go in the ground until late May.

Some recent questions about basic gardening that we've received.

I'm starting a vegetable garden for the very first time. Any pointers?

- Get to know your soil and climate.
- Give it more room than you're thinking.
- Build support for the climbers, which includes many of the summer vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, and pole beans.
- Put in a drip or soaker system to water it. It's easy to do.

How do I get the bed ready?

Pull or mow off the weeds. Spread a layer of compost on the surface and water it thoroughly. Worms and soil organisms will move up into it and begin breaking it down and incorporating it. Let them do the hard work.

Do you need to rototill? Add compost or manure? Fertilizer?

Tilling and amending helps make a better seed bed. It's not necessary if you're transplanting seedlings rather than directly planting the seed.



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Nitrogen will help the seedlings grow faster. That can be from manure or rich compost, granular plant food at the time of planting, or liquid fertilizer applied a week or so after planting.

How often do you water the plants?

Seedlings need to be checked every day for the first couple of weeks. Gradually increase the amount of water you apply as the plants grow. Exact watering recommendations depend on your soil type. In the open ground, water established plants deeply once or twice a week. In raised planters with sandy soil you may need to water daily.

I'm thinking of building raised planters because the soil is pretty cruddy here.

Most soils here are very good. Raised planters have advantages and drawbacks. See more in my Davis Enterprise article from June 2017¹. But to continue....

What's the best material to use? Is there a simpler or cheaper way to go than wood?

One of the simplest approaches is to use concrete blocks or interlocking pavers, stacked up. In the absence of space in the yard, consider livestock watering troughs available from the local feed store.

What do you fill them with?

Native soil from nearby, or topsoil purchased from the rock yard (ask them to blend in some compost). Or you can buy bags of good quality planting/potting soil.

What do most people plant around here? What's really easy to grow?

Very easy to grow: cherry tomatoes, squash, Swiss chard, okra, basil, radishes. For more information, see my article here².

Is it easy to grow tomatoes from seed? Is it too late? What about other vegetables?

Tomatoes are very easy from seed. They'll germinate faster if you do them in pots in a warm, sheltered location. It takes about six to eight weeks for the seedlings to be ready to plant out in the garden. You'll harvest sooner if you buy young plants instead. But it's not too late, if you want to save money and grow your own transplants, to plant tomato seeds.

Peppers and eggplants take much longer to be garden-ready, so I'd buy plants at this point. Many vegetables are easy to seed directly in the ground, once the soil has warmed up more: beans, corn, cucumbers, melons, squash.

How many tomatoes are reasonable to plant for a couple of people?

Two plants give plenty for fresh eating, especially if one is a cherry tomato. Six well-chosen varieties produce enough to eat fresh daily from mid-July through October and provide surplus

¹ <https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/success-with-raised-planters/>

² <https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/don-shor-summer-vegetable-tips/>



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for freezing or canning. A dozen or more will help you feed your neighbors, extended family, and food banks.

How much space to they take up? Do you need to stake them?

These questions are closely related. I make tomato cages from concrete wire, six feet tall and three feet in diameter. The vine fills the cage by late June, cascades over the top and down to the ground by season's end. It takes up 4 to 5 feet diameter of space. Without cages, the vines will cover several feet of your garden.

Do tomatoes need special soil and fertilizer?

Despite what marketers might want you to believe, the answer is no. They grow well in our native soil with just a little nitrogen at the start of the season. In raised planters, because those don't hold nutrients as well and require more frequent watering, you may want to fertilize the plants again mid-summer.

We like squash. Which ones are best? How much room do they need? Why does everyone joke about having too much zucchini?

My father always planted six zucchini plants every year. That is about 5 ½ more than most people need. I got my start in retail selling surplus zucchini door to door. Squash plants sprawl across a few feet of your garden. Zucchini are famous for producing more and more flowers and fruit as the season goes along. After about mid-July most people are pretty surfeited. There's really only so many ways you can cook squash. Personally, I prefer patty pan or tromboncini squash for the firmer texture.

My wife says she wants okra. What's a reasonable amount to plant? Is it easy to grow?

Y'all will be happy to know that okra grows just fine here. If she really, really likes okra, 3 to 4 plants should be plenty.

Having tried every method of cooking that was supposed to cure the mucilaginous character, and finding none of them reduced the sliminess, I just eat it raw now. It's crunchy and mild flavored, and surprisingly pleasant that way. And the flowers are pretty.

My kids really want watermelons and pumpkins. Don't those take up a lot of space?

Yep. Grow them anyway, at least once. Both like warm soil, so plant at the end of May. Water deeply and let them run all over the place. Pumpkins are more rewarding in terms of yield than watermelons.

My kids want a cherry tomato. I like one to just slice for salads and sandwiches. Maybe freeze or make sauce, too. What's the best? Are heirloom tomatoes better?



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I suggest you review my articles here³ and here.⁴ You won't go wrong with Sungold, Early Girl, Champion, Chef's Choice Orange, a sauce tomato, and an interesting heirloom or two. But there are plenty more to consider.

Do we need to spray them with anything? I don't really want to use any pesticides.

We are fortunate to live in a climate where tomato plants and other summer vegetables rarely suffer diseases or major pest issues, so spraying is unnecessary here.

What's one thing you think everyone should grow?

Sweet basil. Our climate is perfect for it. Even if you don't eat it much, the flowers are pretty and attract bees.



We have a very long growing season. This harvest photo was taken in early October. Plant tomatoes April through June, and you can harvest all the way into November here.

³ http://redwoodbarn.com/DE_tomatoseason.html

⁴ <https://www.davisenterprise.com/features/gardening/tomato-time/>



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Patience is rewarded with peppers. They really like warm soil to get going. If you wait and let them ripen, the fruit will be sweeter and richer flavored. This harvest photo was taken in early November.



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Heirloom, hybrid, or? These are some of the Wild Boar Farms tomato varieties selected from open-pollinated plants by local farmer Brad Gates. His plants are increasingly available in the nursery trade, but most are delivered in mid-April to local garden centers around the Sacramento and Davis area.



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One of the most popular tomato introductions of all time. Sungold cherry tomato is tangy-sweet, rich-flavored, very productive, and foolproof.



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An experiment I did to see if I could keep pumpkins in a more limited space: planted in a six-foot tall tomato cage. I thought the fruit would drag down the vines or fall off, but the stems



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are sturdy and they ripened just as shown. Otherwise pumpkin vines run many feet around the yard.



I always plant at least one thing that's odd or interesting. This is a bitter cucumber, used in Asian cooking. Easy to grow and very prolific.