

RU Ready 2 Garden Information Sheet

Beginner Friendly Vegetables and Tips for the Novice Gardener

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For beginner gardeners the initial choice of what to grow can sometimes be daunting. It is easy to get overwhelmed when looking at the many different vegetables and varieties available. Some vegetables are easier to grow than others, and some varieties perform better in our region. Some of the easiest vegetables to grow can also be harvested in a short period of time and provide a healthy addition to your diet. Included here are some things to consider when deciding what vegetables to grow. For additional information on varieties and vegetable culture, see additional fact sheets listed below.

Considerations

As a beginner it would be wise to start small and try growing greens and fast-growing vegetables that require less space. Be aware that certain vegetables can grow better or worse at different temperatures. Most greens, such as lettuce and spinach, will grow very well in the spring or fall when it's cooler, but will quickly go to seed and stop producing edible leaves when it gets too hot. On the other hand, most fruiting plants, such as tomatoes and squash, prefer the hot humid weather of the summer and won't produce very well in cooler seasons. With this in mind a home gardener can maximize the productivity of their space by producing different vegetables in the same container or plot space as the season goes on. For instance, once you harvest your spring lettuce, plant peppers in that spot, when the peppers are done it's time to put in kale for the fall. Just make sure to provide each plant with the nutrients it needs to thrive. More information on plant nutrients can be found in the fact sheet table below.

Purchasing Seed

Always purchase seeds from an established seed source with a track record of providing quality seed. Many online seed suppliers provide details about the characteristics of each variety as well as days to maturity and disease resistance. More information on starting seeds can be found on the fact sheet table below. In saving heirloom seeds, avoid saving seeds from diseased plants to prevent problems the following season.

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Fastest Growing

Some fast growing and beginner friendly vegetables include:

- Radishes – Great for adding a little bit of zest and texture to salads, radishes grow very quickly and can be ready for harvest in as little as 3 weeks in late spring or early fall.
- Scallions – Also called green onions, scallions add a great pop of mild onion flavor to dishes as a cooking ingredient or garnish. They are cold hardy and need only 21 days until harvest and can be grown year-round with the right set up.
- Lettuce – This salad staple can be grown as part of a mixed bed of microgreens or as individual heads in as little as 30 days. It is cold tolerant and can be planted outdoors in early spring and fall.
- Spinach – For salads or sauté, spinach can be grown very quickly in cooler weather. The baby leaves can be picked with a few weeks of planting outdoors or the plant can be allowed to mature for harvest in 30 days.
- Kale – A powerhouse of nutrients with leaves that can be continuously harvested throughout its cooler growing seasons. Harvest can begin within 50 days and can continue well into winter if the kale is planted in the fall.
- Turnips – This starchy root vegetable grows quickly in cooler weather and can store in the refrigerator for quite a while depending on variety. The root and greens are edible and can be harvested in as few as 30 days, though waiting until 40 or 50 will result in a larger root.
- Beets – Like turnips, beet roots and greens are both edible and packed with flavor and nutrients. They can be started in cooler weather but are not as cold tolerant as some other vegetable. Depending on variety and size desired they can take anywhere from 40-55 days to be ready for harvest.
- Zucchini and squash – These mild flavored, fast-growing vegetables like the warm, humid weather of mid-summer. They take only 40-50 days to begin producing fruit. Consider additional plantings every 3-4 weeks to ensure continuous production all summer long.
- Small carrot varieties – Certain varieties of carrot are especially sweet when picked small and need only 50 days until maturity. They can be left in the ground to grow larger as well. The seed packet will give you precise guidelines on when each variety should be picked.
- Small cucumber varieties – Some varieties of cucumber, particularly those meant for pickling, will begin bearing fruit in as few as 50 days. They can be picked very small for making gherkins, or allowed to grow larger. Cucumbers will continue to get bigger on the vine, but don't let them get too large or they will become seedy and unappetizing.

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- Tomatoes – Tomatoes can produce a bountiful harvest and are one of the easier fruiting vegetables to grow. Select varieties will begin to produce fruit in as few as 50 days. Determinate varieties of tomato will grow to a certain size and produce fruit for a short period of time, whereas indeterminate varieties will continue to grow and produce throughout the warmer months. Sungold and Sweet 100 cherry tomatoes and Celebrity, Early Girl, and Rutgers grow well in containers with support from cages.
- Peppers – Peppers can grow in 3 to 5 gallon containers and some hot peppers will grow in smaller pots if provided with adequate moisture and nutrients. Some excellent choices of peppers include sweet peppers (Yummy variety), banana peppers, and Jalapeno hot peppers.
- Beans- Bush and pole beans are easy to grow and can be seeded directly in the garden after the danger of frost has passed.

Microgreens and Baby Greens

Microgreens and baby greens are vegetables and herbs that are harvested early in their life cycle for their young tender leaves. Microgreens are harvested when the first leaves appear and baby greens are typically harvested when they reach 2 to 4 inches in height. Microgreens are harvested when the first leaves (cotyledons) or the first true leaves appear which is between 7 to 14 days depending on the type of seed. Baby greens are harvested at 18 to 22 days when the true leaves are about 2 to 4 inches in height. Sterile potting mix, peat moss, or coco fiber can be used to grow microgreens and baby greens. Extreme care must be taken at all stages of growth, harvest, and storage to prevent contamination with bacteria and fungi that may cause foodborne illness.

Hybrid vs. Heirloom Vegetables

Beginner gardeners should start by growing hybrid varieties of vegetables, these are denoted in seed catalogs by the code F1 or possibly F2. Traditional plant breeding methods are used to produce hybrid plants with traits such as disease resistance. This can reduce or eliminate the need for pesticides throughout the growing season. Beginners should grow hybrid varieties that have improved traits instead of heirloom selections due to the greater potential for disease, lower yields, and increased potential for fruit cracking among heirlooms, particularly in the case of tomatoes. It is important to note that you cannot save seed from hybrid varieties, since the seeds produced will not faithfully grow into plants of the same quality as the parents.

Getting Started with the Easiest Vegetables to Grow

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Some of the easiest vegetables to grow are greens. Greens are grown for their nutritious leaves and rapid growth. Leaf lettuce, spinach and mesclun (lettuce mixture with other edible leaves such as arugula, chicory, dandelion greens, mustard greens, and radicchio), will grow well in small containers. Greens can be seeded every 3 to 4 weeks in long, shallow (4 to 6 inches deep and wide) containers to produce a bountiful harvest throughout the season. They require less light than fruiting crops and can be grown indoors with the help of a sunny window and grow lights.

Beets, radishes, and turnips are also good choices for fast growing vegetables that have edible leaves and roots. They can be grown in pots or in garden soil and can begin to produce a crop in a matter of weeks.

Fact Sheets for Beginner Gardeners	
For information on site selection, vegetable placement, and spacing.	FS129-Planning a Vegetable Garden https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs129/
For information on starting seeds indoors including recommendations on grow mix.	FS787-Starting Vegetable Seeds Indoors https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs787/
For information on growing in containers, including varieties that do well.	FS055-Container Gardening with Vegetables https://njaes.rutgers.edu/FS055/
For information on nutrients and fertilizer requirements and techniques.	FS626-Fertilizing the Home Vegetable Garden https://njaes.rutgers.edu/FS626/
For specific in-depth information on growing tomatoes.	FS678-Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs678/
For information on insect control and common home garden pests.	FS1123-Vegetable Insect Control Recommendations for Home Gardens https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1123/
For information on disease control and common diseases of home gardens.	FS1124-Vegetable Disease Recommendations for Home Gardens https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.php?pid=FS1124
For general information on selecting vegetable varieties.	FS681-Varieties for New Jersey Home Vegetable Gardeners https://njaes.rutgers.edu/fs681/