

Five tips for new Vegetable Gardeners

Nicole Sanchez

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Vegetable gardening is trending way, way up in response to changes in our world: Images of empty grocery store shelves have more people than ever considering growing some of their own food. The short growing season, and cool nights even in midsummer, make vegetable growing in the Klamath Basin particularly challenging, even to those who have successfully “grown their own” elsewhere, where conditions are more favorable. In addition to increasing food security, vegetable gardening is therapeutic, a valuable and soothing way to spend increased hours at home. A few tips tailored to the local growing area can help new, and newly transplanted, vegetable gardeners enjoy greater success in the quest for tasty vegetables fresh from the yard.

Don't be in a hurry. The earlier plants are started outside here, the more work ultimately needed to protect them from cold. Plant hardiness varies with developmental stage, even in cold-hardy plants like kale, spinach, cabbage, parsley, and beets. Other plants can survive in cool temperatures, but do not thrive, or can even be stunted, which slows growth even after temperatures warm. Consider how much season extension is appropriate for your garden and situation. Season extension encompasses a variety of techniques used to warm the soil and air right around the plant to provide better growing conditions—each with different monetary and labor costs. Be especially unhurried to put out warm season vegetables—tomatoes, peppers, melons, cucumbers, and squash—the soil is not warm enough yet.

Harden off in stages. Starting seeds indoors is one short growing season “workaround”. Matching when the seedlings should go out with the best weather conditions can be challenging. Plants grown at room temperature, planted on a sunny day, and thrust into a frost their first night are going to fail. “Hardening off” is acclimating the plants to cooler and cooler temperatures gradually. This might include moving to a different room or garage, or putting plants out for part of the day, bringing them inside at night.

Be prepared to pamper. Vegetable gardening in the Klamath Basin requires more dedication than in other places—regular watering, frost protection ability at almost any time, keeping soil warm, fertilizing enough to promote vigorous growth without applying too much. Be willing to pay attention to the weather, and cover or move plants accordingly, all through the summer. Area soils vary widely. It may be worthwhile to invest in a soil test if gardening in your yard for the first time.

Start small. It's very easy for gardeners to start way too much seed: both new and experienced gardeners gleefully underestimate the amount of time it will later take to weed, water, pick, and weed some more. The long period between the “cute little seedling” stage and the harvesting stage can be discouraging to the new gardener, involving much more work than anticipated. Occasionally, a new gardener overcomes this stage to be assaulted with so much harvest that the new work involved with preserving or giving away the bounty is equally discouraging. Starting small can prevent these challenges, helping the gardener more easily find balance between what can be grown and what can be eaten. Thinking small is of value to those growing in containers or raised beds: numerous vegetable varieties have been developed specifically for these small spaces, or for consumption by small families. Descriptive information in a good seed catalog can help the veggie gardener make choices best suited to their growing conditions.

Direct seed vs. transplanting. Not all plants transplant equally well, so the indoor- starting workaround will not apply to all vegetables. In general, root crops such as beets, carrots, onions and the like are better off not transplanted. Most gardening literature will suggest that seed size is a good way to judge whether to transplant or direct seed: small seeds started indoors then transplanted, large seeds go right into the ground. However, many of those large seeds, like melons, can take a long time to mature, so that wisdom must be weighed against the value of starting them indoors in a short season.

During this time of social distancing, your local Cooperative Extension service is still here to help you answer gardening questions. One easy way to submit questions is by using our Ask an Expert site: <https://ask.extension.org/ask>. Our entire catalog of publications is available online. Gardening publications can be found at: <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/topic/gardening>. Extension is still here to help gardeners, new or experienced, be successful in food- raising efforts.