

Vegetable Gardening 101

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More people than ever before are growing as many vegetables and kitchen herbs as they can fit in their gardens. Growing your own vegetables and herbs saves money and garden-grown food often tastes better and is more nutritious because it's fresh, and then there is the simple satisfaction of helping a seed or seedling grow into a healthy, productive plant. These days concerns about food safety provide further motivation to grow fresh food with your own hands, in your own soil.

Most vegetables are annuals that make fast progress when planted at the right time. No matter where you live in the Carolinas, the planting season can be divided into five mini-seasons, as shown in the accompanying charts. To make sure your garden offers something good to eat every day, start planting first thing in spring and don't stop until fall is well under way.

What should you plant? Start with vegetables you like that have a home-grown difference you can see and taste. Spring snow peas or new potatoes are great season openers to get growing while you wait for tomato planting time to roll around, and you can fill the summer sauna season

with baby eggplant or edamame (vegetable soybean) – a delicious legume that laughs at humid heat.

Vegetables have in common a need for at least six hours of full sun each day, along with deeply dug soil amended with organic matter and enough fertilizer to meet the needs of the plants. Too much fertilizer can be worse than too little, so many gardeners mix a modest dose of fertilizer into the soil before planting and then switch to a water soluble plant food as the plants gain size.

Many vegetables can be planted from seeds sown right in the garden, but with others you can save several weeks of growing time by setting out seedlings. When working with seeds, thinning is usually needed to give plants proper spacing. With seedlings, be sure to water them thoroughly the night before transplanting.

If you're new to vegetable gardening stick with crops that have few pest enemies, for example leaf lettuce (early spring), green beans (late spring) and okra (summer). Also keep in mind that while compact varieties of some vegetables can be grown in containers, they are most at home in the ground where there are no limits on how far they can stretch their roots in search of nutrients and moisture.

Cool-natured crops for mid-spring planting

Vegetables and Herbs	What to Expect	When to Plant
Direct seed: Beets, carrots, cilantro, dill	Planting dates are more precise for these veggies, which grow best when soil temperatures range between 50 and 65 degrees. Exposure to too much cold can trigger bolting of carrots, onions and leafy greens. Hardy perennial herbs transplant best in mid-spring.	Coast: Feb. 15-March 15
Transplant: Cauliflower, mints, onions, Greek oregano, rosemary, sage, tarragon		Piedmont: March 15-April 1
		Mountains: April 1-15



Baby Dill

Warm-natured crops for late spring



Sugary tomatos

Vegetables and Herbs	What to Expect	When to Plant
Direct seed: Beans, corn	Wait until the last frost has passed and soil feels warm to the touch to plant these summer crops. Mulch to retain soil moisture and suppress weeds. Plants should be well rooted, weeded and mulched before hot weather arrives. Cucumber family crops need close watching for insect pests. Stake tomatoes to reduce disease problems.	Coast: March 15-April 1
Seed or transplant: Basil, cucumber, squash, watermelon		Piedmont: April 15-May 15
Transplant: Pepper, tomato		Mountains: May 1-June 1

First crops for early spring planting

Vegetables and Herbs	What to Expect	When to Plant
Direct seed: Lettuce, mustard, parsley, radish, snap and snow peas, spinach, turnips	These plants crave cool conditions and tolerate frost, but should be covered with blankets, plastic tunnels or other protection through hard freezes. An early start is crucial, because lengthening days cause leafy greens to bolt, and warm temperatures stop the production of peas and potatoes.	Coast: February 1-March 1
Transplant: Cabbage, potatoes, thyme, chives		Piedmont: March 1-April 1
		Mountains: March 15-April 15



Spinach

Heat-tolerant crops for high summer

Vegetables and Herbs	What to Expect	When to Plant
Direct seed: Edamame, lima bean, okra, southern peas	Tropical ancestry gives these crops strong staying power in hot, humid weather. Use as replacements for cool-season spring crops. Plant before rain is expected, or provide water to keep seeded areas moist until seeds germinate. Mulch to retain soil moisture and suppress weeds.	Coast: April 15-June 1
Seed or transplant: Pumpkin		Piedmont: May 1-June 30
Transplant: Eggplant, sweet potato		Mountains: May 15-June 30



Eggplant