

April 30, 2017 Garden Column
Vegetable plants for new gardeners
Dr. Robert Nyvall
rfnyvall@gmail.com

"in order to live off a garden, you practically have to live in it". - Frank McKinnery Hubbard, journalist. This is a common but gloomy view of gardening that has undoubtedly deterred many potential gardeners from getting their hands dirty and their backs sore.

The beginning of a garden can be a daunting challenge to a "wannabe" gardener. However, growing vegetables can be an easy and satisfying. And there are several easy-to-grow vegetables that can be planted with little effort and produce great rewards. Author Abby Adams wrote, "A garden is a finite place, in which a gardener has created a plot whose intention it is to provide pleasure; possibly in the form of beauty, possibly in the form of cabbages, and possibly, beautiful cabbages."

The word 'vegetable' has no precise botanical meaning in referring to food plants. Almost all parts of plants have been employed as vegetables. Roots, carrot and beet; stems, asparagus; leaves, spinach and lettuce; leaf stalk, celery and Swiss chard; bracts, artichoke; flower stalks and buds, broccoli and cauliflower; fruits, tomato and squash; seeds, beans; tubers, potatoes, and even the petals, pumpkin and squashes.

If you're a beginner, consider starting with the 10 plants listed below. All are easy to grow; some are best grown by setting out transplant but most are easy to grow from a packet of seeds. Most can be found at Bloomers. Because of Garden Column space limitations I would suggest each beginning gardener research specific requirements for the following plants or carefully read the seed packet. However, all plants need sunshine, water, and some fertilizer,.

1. Bell peppers. Plant transplants after danger of frost is over about 18 to 24 inches apart. Place a small amount of 10-10-10 fertilizer around the base of each plant and water in. Rabbits and

deer like green peppers so a protective enclosure may be needed.

2. Green beans. Easy to grow, harvest, and freeze. Plant seeds after all danger of frost has passed. Consider the bush type if space is limited. Otherwise a trellis is needed for the "viney" types to grow up on.

3. Onions are usually started as "sets" or transplants. Plant as soon as the ground can be worked in the spring. Plant about 1 inch deep and 4 to 5 inches apart in rows 12 to 18 inches apart.

4. Peas. A cool weather crop that requires an early start. Plant seeds about a half inch deep and about a inch apart in a sunny location when the soil has thawed. The season for pea growing is short. Most varieties require about 60 days of growth before harvest but stop growing and producing flowers and pods once temperatures get above 85F.

5. Potatoes. Plant tubers 3 to 5 inches deep when the danger of frost is past. Most seed tubers are treated with a fungicide to prevent rot. Do not plant tubers from the grocery store as they may be treated with a chemical to prevent sprouting. Hill soil up along plants as they grow. Tubers will form on stolons that emerge from the main stem and these should be covered with soil to avoid exposing tubers to sunlight that may turn them green and cause the formation of potentially bitter tasting chemicals. Start hilling when plants are a foot tall and once or twice more during the growing season.

6. Radishes. Radishes do well even in poor soils and are ready to harvest in a few weeks, perfect for salads. However, over mature plants tend to be "woody" and taste bad. The number of different types of radishes is nearly endless. They can be spicy or mild, round or oblong, big or small, and in a variety of colors from reddish-purple to pink, white and even green. Plant in the spring when the soil thaws.

7. Salad greens. These include but are not limited to collards, Kale, lettuce, spinach, and arugula. Sow seeds as soon as the soil can be worked in the spring. Plant seeds 1/4 to 1/2 deep in

rows 18 to 30 inches apart. Follow thinning directions on the seed packet. For a continuous salad supply, plant spinach seeds every 1 to 2 weeks until temperature reaches 80F.

8. Strawberries are relatively easy to grow in an area set aside for them. Plant bare root plants in a sunny spot and keep the strawberry bed weed free and well-watered. Remove some runners throughout the season or the plants will take over a yard. There are three types of strawberries but all produce more fruit the second year. June-bearing produce the most fruit of all varieties from mid to late June, Ever-bearing produce two crops, one in early summer and the second in early fall. Day neutral plants produce fruit throughout the growing season.

9. Tomatoes. The iconic summer vegetable. Most beginning gardeners buy transplants rather than starting plants from seed. Simply plant the seedling in a sunny location and water well. Work in a 0-5-5 fertilizer around the plant base. Any fertilizer that is high in nitrogen will cause the plant to put on a lot of foliage and very few flowers. Each plant must have a support cage or older plants will fall on the ground.

10. Zucchini. Possibly the easiest vegetable to grow. Plant seeds when danger of frost is past. There are numerous varieties and all are prolific producers. If garden space is limited think about growing the bush type.

I tend to feel about vegetable gardening much as author and Gertrude Stein's companion Alice Toklas said, "The emotion of wonder filled me for each vegetable as it was gathered every year. There is nothing that is comparable to it, as satisfactory or as thrilling, as gathering the vegetables one has grown."