

Home gardeners are gearing up for spring season

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



"When should I start my spring garden?" "Which varieties of vegetables should I plant?" These are two of the most commonly asked questions by home vegetable gardeners when the spring growing season arrives.

The answer to the first question is fairly straightforward — it depends primarily on the specific vegetable in question. The answer to the second question is not as simple — it depends on several factors.

Variety selection sometimes depends upon the intended use of the crop. For example, some of the newly released tomato varieties that produce a crop in a relatively short period of time are ideal for canning purposes. Varieties of tomatoes that mature over an extended period of time are better suited for the dinner table. Small-fruited tomatoes are best used in salads, while the larger ones are better for slicing.

Numerous vegetable varieties are released every year, and many offer improvements such as increased yields, disease resistance and uniformity. Seed catalogs offer hundreds of selections, each with an appealing description and attractive photograph to make decisions even more difficult. Quite often the new varieties are highly desirable, but sometimes the old standards prove to be more reliable — and even better — in their performance during many growing seasons.

The home gardener can best answer the question of which vegetable varieties to plant. The best approach is to select varieties that are recommended for Galveston County based on several years of proven performance. Both old and new varieties should be tried and compared for yield and performance. Give new, unproven varieties a chance if space is not a limiting factor, but remember they might per-

form well in one year but be quite disappointing in others. That's why you should plant most of your garden with tried and recommended varieties that have proven to be reliable over several years under different growing conditions.

The high temperatures of summer will be advancing upon us in a few weeks. Each vegetable performs best if planted within recommended planting dates, which are based on results from years of field trials. The earlier you can get your vegetables started within these recommended dates, the better. However, even if you plant after the recommended cutoff planting date, it only means you might have to water more often (if late spring weather conditions are on the dry side) and yields might not be as great but something is better than nothing, especially if freshly harvested.

The following information describes some vegetables and vegetable varieties recommended by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service for spring planting in the Galveston County area. The recommended planting dates for each vegetable are given immediately after each vegetable listed.

- Cucumbers (March 1 to May 1) are best grown on a trellis or fence to save space. Use of some type of trellis also will significantly improve the quality of cucumbers produced.



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If you love cucumbers but they don't agree with your tummy, then definitely try one of the "burpless" hybrids such as Sweet Success (an All-America Winner) or Green Knight.

Cucumber plants should be spaced 24 to 48 inches apart, and if planted on the ground, rows should be 48 to 72 inches apart. This is a giant of a cucumber, 12 to 18 inches long, and it needs to be grown on a fence or trellis.

Other varieties include: slicing types — Poinsett 76, Sweet Slice, and most of the new hybrids; and pickling types — Carolina, National and Patio Pik (Dwarf).

- Tomatoes (March 10 to April 10) rank as America's most-favored vegetable for the home garden (although botanically speaking it is a fruit but the focus here is growing tomatoes and not passing Botany 101). Sound hopeless? It isn't. It just demands following a few rules.

They will not set fruit when night temperatures dip below 60 degrees, nor when day temperatures exceed 93 degrees. Don't overfertilize with nitrogen (the first number on a fertilizer bag analysis is the percentage of nitrogen). Otherwise, you'll get a big bush and no fruit.

Plant the wrong varieties and no matter what you do chances are you'll have a crop failure. Plant recommended varieties like Better Boy, Carnival, Celebrity, Champion and Dona.

For a canning variety, try Roma. For salads, try one of the cherry tomatoes.

Begin controlling pests soon after planting, and before long, you'll be eating tomatoes.

While March 10 was the recommended starting date for transplanting tomatoes, some seasoned gardeners

start setting a few plants out during mid-February. However, they also were prepared to provide some type of cold protection to transplants should a late cold spell occur.

Are pumpkins, watermelons, turnips, lettuce, or other vegetables on your planting list for the 2011 spring season? Then, contact the Galveston County Extension Office to obtain a free publication titled "Recommended Vegetable Varieties for Galveston County," which contains pertinent planting information on a wide array of vegetables. This publication also is available as a free download from my website given at the end of this column.

If your planting finger is itching, don't wait a minute longer.

