

Month-by-Month Guide to Vegetable Gardening

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When to Plant

As the saying goes, timing is everything—and that’s never more true than when it comes to vegetable gardening. Determining the right time to start seeds and to plant outdoors is essential, which is why following a month-by-month to-do list can mean the difference between a happy harvest and a heartbreaking one. One important note: Since the USDA Hardiness Zone Map divides North America into 11 separate zones—each zone is 10°F warmer (or colder) during an average winter than the adjacent zone—the correct start dates vary for different parts of the country. (The timeline featured here is roughly based on the timing for Zone 8.) The best way to determine the exact timing for your garden is to ask the county cooperative extension in your area for a localized calendar. (Contact info is available at extension.org.) Now, get growing!

January

The bottom line: The more prep work you do now, the better your plants will fare.

Preparation

Whether you’re gearing up to plant a new vegetable garden or make improvements to one you already have, start by creating a map with the outline of your beds. Sketch out your arrangement for the coming season: Remember, crops need to rotate every year. Get in the habit of saving and dating the maps from year to year: You’ll have a convenient record of what was planted where and when. Jot down notes on the backs as reminders of successes and failures to help steer you

on what to plant the next year.

Starting plants from seed? Peruse catalogs and order early, because popular varieties can sell out. Keep an eye out for words like “new” and “improved”—in this case, not just a marketing gimmick—to take advantage of research advances in disease resistance, flavor, and fruiting.

If you want to begin with seedlings that are ready to be transplanted, make a shopping list of what you’ll buy at the nursery when the time comes. Newbies should ask for recommendations about which vegetables are easiest to grow; begin with a small assortment and add to the selection as you gain confidence and experience.

February

The bottom line: While it’s too early to actually start planting most vegetables, there are tasks you can take on inside and outside.

Preparation

Finish up your seed orders. When the seeds arrive, read the instructions on the packets and make a chart of what date to start each variety, working backward from the last frost date for your area. Germination rates—how long it takes a plant to go from seed to the first sign of leaves—vary, and in order to have the little guys ready to plant, you must start them at the right time. To keep your information straight, write down your ideal planting day for each one on a Post-It, stick it to the individual packets, and organize the seeds in chronological order in a card file.

To prep for seed starting, hit the stores and stock up on enough of the right growing mix, seed trays, and peat pots (or whatever other method you plan to use).

Make sure you have the necessary tools; fill in any gaps in your collection and clean and sharpen the tools you already own. The essentials: a round-headed shovel, a garden spade and fork, a scuffle hoe, a dirt rake, a bypass pruner, a trowel, a garden thermometer, and a wheelbarrow. Gloves and—c’mon, you know you love ’em—garden shoes complete the list.

Planting

Outside: If the ground is workable, plant bare root perennial vegetables like asparagus, artichoke, horseradish, and rhubarb.

Inside: Start seeds for cool-season vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, kale, lettuce, spinach, and onions.

March

The bottom line: Since this month tends to be unpredictable weather-wise, have row covers at the ready for any late-season frosts or freezes that might damage perennials.

Preparation

Outside: Most vegetables prefer a slightly acidic soil (6.0 to 6.8 pH); pick up a pH test kit at a garden center to make sure yours is in the right range. No such luck? Make adjustments as recommended on the package, using organic matter to increase or decrease the soil's acidity. Even if your test is good, you should amend the soil—i.e., add conditioners, such as compost, peat moss, or coir (coconut fiber), that improve its texture—yearly, and give perennial vegetables a boost by “side dressing” it with organic compost or aged manure. (Scatter the fertilizer along the sides of a row of plants; turn it into the existing soil with a spading fork and rake it smooth.) If you're stuck with soil that's beyond saving, consider building raised beds instead and filling them with good soil.

Inside: Start seeds of warm season crops such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, pumpkin, snap beans, squash, and sweet corn.

Planting

Use a garden thermometer to determine if the soil temperature is at or above 40°F. When it gets there, start planting (or “setting out,” in garden lingo) the seeds you've started for cool-season crops: kale, lettuce, spinach, and onions.

At the end of the month, plant peas. If the ground is wet and muddy, hold off so you don't destroy the soil by working in it too soon.

April

The bottom line: The weather can still work against you—keep those row covers handy in case of a nighttime cold snap—but otherwise you should be getting into full swing.

Preparation

Check soil temperature regularly with your thermometer. When it consistently registers at 60°F or above, you have the go-ahead to plant some warm-season crops.

If you didn't start your own seeds, buy transplants and seedlings of early-season crops like radishes, spinach, onions, leeks, lettuce, cabbage, beets, peas, Brussels sprouts, and carrots.

Planting

Begin setting out your early-season crops. Try to pick an overcast day to minimize transplant shock—the stress that occurs when plants are moved from a cushy greenhouse environment to the harsh real world. Be sure to water well at planting time. When finished, add a two- to three-inch layer of mulch to suppress weeds and keep in moisture.

For greens, sow seeds directly in the garden where they'll grow. Plant them in succession, every few weeks, for a continuous harvest through the season.

Maintenance

Until newly transplanted seedlings develop root systems, make sure they don't dry out or you'll lose them. And stay on top of weeds, catching them before they begin to spread.



May

The bottom line: Take advantage of warm temps, longer days, and moist soil to do the bulk of your remaining plantings. But resist the temptation to plant more than you can reasonably take care of as the season advances.

Preparation

Check soil temperatures for readings consistently above 70°F to know when to plant heat-loving crops like tomatoes and peppers. Confirm that you have the gear you need to water the garden: As temperatures warm, consistent moisture will be of the utmost importance.

Planting

You can continue (or start) planting any early-season crops, plus tomatoes, squash, melons, eggplant, peppers, sweet corn, cucumbers, potatoes, and herbs. Water and mulch any new transplants with care.

If choosing to sow directly in the garden, start your carrots, beets, and radishes. Don't mulch these areas until seedlings are up several inches and have been thinned (you've sorted out the small, deformed, or overcrowded seedlings).

Maintenance

Follow packet instructions for proper spacing of the crops that were direct sown and thin the seedlings accordingly.

Watch for insect damage on leaves (missing notches, holes, pits, or stripped stems). When you spy signs of trouble, control the situation by removing the affected leaves, employing a row cover to create a barrier, or spraying or dusting with an organic pesticide. Consult a garden center or extension service for a recommendation of the best action.

Harvest

Cool-season plants like asparagus, peas, and spring greens will be getting ready for harvest. (P.S. The more you harvest, the more they produce!)

June

The bottom line: Full speed ahead! Through the next few months, your focus will be on maintenance and harvest.

Planting

Early in the month, finish getting any warm-season vegetables into the ground. Direct sow the warm-season crops you plan to grow in place. Continue to thin seedlings of direct-sown crops that were planted earlier.

Maintenance

As your plants shoot up, be prepared with staking materials; you'll need plenty of bamboo stakes in different heights to keep your crops from succumbing to gravity.

About one month after planting, side dress crops with organic compost. If you didn't use mulch, get out there with a scuffle hoe and attack the weeds.

Harvest

Harvest during the cooler times of day—early morning or evening—when plants are least stressed. Continue to pick greens, peas, beans, and herbs. Stop harvesting asparagus and rhubarb, which need to rebuild their food reserves in order to produce a good crop again next year.



July

The bottom line: You can't slack off completely, but get ready for the big payoff.

Planting

Extend the season with a late harvest of beans, carrots, cucumbers, cauliflower, and other cold-season crops. Where you have room, cultivate and amend the soil with compost before direct sowing seeds or planting seedlings.

Maintenance

Remove suckers—the growth between the main stem and the leaf—on tomato plants and pull out any finished early-season crops. Continue staking tomatoes and other plants as necessary.

Water in the early morning, the best time to reduce evaporation. Try to water the soil, not the leaves, to reduce fungal disease. Be sure to maintain consistent moisture so fruit develops successfully. (Drought-stressed plants are more susceptible to fungi and insect trouble.) Check mulch, topping off areas that have thinned. And weed away! Weeds rob plants of water and nutrients.

Harvest

Harvest daily. If there's too much of a good thing, share your bounty. Use an old plastic laundry basket to collect produce that is ready to be picked, and hose off the contents outside—it'll act as a giant colander.

August

The bottom line: It's the dog days of summer, and both you and the garden need a break. Kick back and enjoy.

Preparation

Make some notes about your successes and failures. (You may not remember those ravishing radishes or sickly heirloom tomatoes come January when you start to plan next year's garden.)

Planting

If you haven't planted for the fall harvest yet (see July), it's not too late to start now.

Maintenance

Monitor moisture, insects, and disease; if there's an issue, deal with it right away. Pick up and discard fallen or decaying fruit—leaving it encourages diseases and insects.

Harvest

Keep picking! Cut fresh herbs for freezing or drying to use over the winter.



September

The bottom line: With the weather getting less predictable, job one is to protect tender plants such as tomatoes from frost with sheets or covers to keep them ripening on the vine as long as possible.

Planning

As the weather cools, this is a good time to dig and prepare new beds for the spring or build additional raised beds and fill with amended soil.

Planting

Pot up selections of your favorite, healthiest herbs in planters to bring inside for the winter. Continue planting cool-season vegetables for winter harvest.

Maintenance

Keep pulling up finished plants and discarding fallen or rotten fruit to discourage overwintering of insect larvae (meaning they stay alive underground through the cold months ahead). Check that the mulch is layered thick enough on cold-season crops.

Harvest

Some plants will keep producing even through light frosts. Others will continue only if protected overnight with covers. Green tomatoes can be picked and wrapped individually in newspaper and stored in a cool spot (55° to 60°F) to ripen. If frost is predicted nightly and your tomato plants are covered with unripe fruit, you can pull the whole plant up by the roots and hang it upside down in a protected place like a garage, where fruit will continue ripen on the vine. Promptly remove any tomatoes that go bad.

October

The bottom line: Mother Nature will dictate what you can accomplish. If the weather holds, then by all means, plug away. But if winter-like weather is upon you, prioritize and do what you can.

Planting

Continue planting cool-season crops like beets, cauliflower, kale, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, chives, celery, onions, parsley, parsnips, peas, radishes, spinach, lettuce, turnips, and Swiss chard.

Maintenance

Protect new seedlings and winter crops from weather extremes with floating row covers, which are made of lightweight polyester that “floats” on plants. Pull out and rake off garden debris; rake leaves out of beds and add to compost pile. Compost anything that is not diseased or infested with insects. Store garden supplies and potions in a dry place. Remove, dismantle, and store stakes and cages that were erected for plant support.

Harvest

Dig up potatoes and store in a dark place with low humidity, and pick winter squashes and pumpkins before a hard freeze. Keep harvesting fall crops like beets, cabbage, chard, and leeks.

November

The bottom line: Weather permitting, you may still get in some garden time. The more you do now, the easier it all becomes in the spring.

Planning

Order seed catalogs for January planning.

Maintenance

Continue watering cool-season vegetable plants if rainfall alone isn't enough. Every two weeks, feed vegetable plants with a water-soluble organic fertilizer (like fish emulsion).

Cut asparagus plants to the ground as soon as the foliage has turned yellow or brown. Spread a few inches of aged manure or organic compost over the bed.

Harvest

Harvest greens and other cool-season vegetables that are producing.

December

The bottom line: If you planted a winter garden, keep harvesting, weeding and watering as needed. If you didn't, enjoy the holidays!