

Save the Date (April 30) and Plan Now for Your Vegetable Garden

It's March madness! The basketball enthusiasts are living the dream this next couple of weeks. How many of you have had your brackets busted already? There is another reason for March madness. March can be warm like this week and cold like a week ago. The cold, wintery days are probably not behind us. Warm weeks like this are reminders we should be planning not planting our vegetable gardens. The calendar tomorrow will say it is spring but don't get in too big of a hurry.

Planning is an important aspect of gardening. It's tempting to skip this step, but over time, you will find it is necessary for a successful garden. Remember that plant families should be rotated. Since plants have different nutrient needs, planting the same families of vegetables in the same space year after year will deplete nutrients in that area. For example, potatoes, tomatoes, and other members of the Solanaceae, or nightshade family, are heavy feeders meaning they utilize lots of nutrients in the soil.

Diseases are also specific to particular plant families. It is important to clean up the vegetable garden at the end of the season, as spores on infected plant material can quickly infect newly planted crops. Potatoes and tomatoes are both susceptible to early and late blights. If infected plant material is left behind over the winter, the spores can quickly find their host if the area is replanted with potatoes and tomatoes.

Rotation of plant families is also important to protect from troublesome insects. Insects that specialize on one type of vegetable will easily find their favorite meal again. Insects such as potato beetles overwinter in the soil nearby and will emerge in the same area the following year.

A practical reason to plan your garden is to have a realistic idea of what your garden will look like. On paper you can move plants and beds. You can anticipate spacing and how much room the vegetables need. Make sure to include family favorites, as well as any new varieties you want to try. If you decide to trellis cucumbers or beans, you may find enough open space to try a new heat tolerant variety of lettuce.

If this is going to be your first try at a vegetable garden you will want to do some planning to prevent problems later down the road. The first consideration would be selecting an appropriate site. It is usually wise to start out small for the first garden. Often times folks take on more than they can handle and cannot keep up with the care of their garden.

There are several factors to consider when selecting a garden site. Sunlight is a factor to consider when looking for a garden site. The garden should receive at least six hours of direct sunlight each day, eight to ten hours each day is ideal.

Another factor is the nearness to the house. The closer the vegetable garden is to your house and the easier it is to reach, the more you will probably use it.

The third consideration is soil. The soil should be fertile, well-drained, and easy to till. Avoid wet areas where the soil remains soggy after a rain. Heavy clay and sandy soils can be improved by incorporating organic matter such as compost.

The fourth factor to consider is water. The garden will need at least 1 inch of water per week. Therefore, locate the garden near a water source. The last consideration when selecting a garden site is good air

drainage. Avoid locating the garden in low spots such as the base of a hill. These areas can be slow to warm in the spring and frost forms more readily in them because the cold air cannot drain away.

Before planting vegetables, time should be taken to prepare the soil. If the soil in the garden site is heavy clay or light sandy soil, the soil can be made loamier by adding organic matter (compost). You can incorporate a 2-to-3-inch layer of compost in late winter/ early spring before preparing the soil for planting. A soil sample should be taken every two to three years to find out the pH or acidity of your soil. The ideal pH for most vegetables is 6.0 to 6.5. The soil test report will tell you how much lime and fertilizer your garden soil will need. When applying lime, try to apply it several months before planting. Soil test information is available at the Clinton County Extension Office. Making those preparations now can lead to a rewarding harvest of freshly grown vegetables this year.

Once you have your plan ready then the fun begins by locating seeds or plants for the garden. When it comes to what vegetable to plant, you can break vegetables into two groups: warm and cool season. Cool season vegetables will perform better during the cooler months of spring and fall. These vegetables can tolerate colder temperatures and some light frosts. Examples of cool season vegetables would include broccoli, cabbage, carrots, collards, lettuce, onions, garden peas, potatoes, radishes, rutabagas, spinach, and turnips. The great thing about most cool season vegetables is that you can plant them for a spring and/or fall garden. .

Warm season vegetables perform best in warm weather and cannot tolerate frost or freeze. Examples of warm season vegetables include beans, cantaloupe, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, okra, peppers, squash, tomatoes, watermelons, and zucchini. Warm season vegetables are best planted in late April into May after the chance of frost has passed.

Mark your calendars, the Clinton County Master Gardeners will have their annual vegetable, herb and flower plant sale Saturday, April 30th at the Clinton County Fairgrounds. This is an excellent opportunity to get all the necessary plants for your garden. Stay tuned for more details.



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