



April Tips

VEGETABLES

by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

- "Don't cultivate your garden." This may sound like very poor advice, but the truth is -- cultivating and deep hoeing cause considerable damage to the shallow roots of flowers and vegetables. Also, every time you cultivate, you stir the soil and bring weed seeds to the surface where they can germinate. A 2-inch layer of mulch will stop annual weeds, otherwise, cut off weeds at the surface of the soil with a sharp scuffle hoe, so in a week or 10 days, you won't have another batch to destroy. If you do not have a scuffle hoe, pull the weeds by hand. If you start early in the season and keep them pulled regularly, it is not too big a job in a small- to medium-sized garden.
- Erect trellises now for beans and cucumbers, if you are going to train them on trellises later in the season.
- Many carrots are available, from round and blunt forms to the long, tapering types. The half-long varieties, such as Nantes or Danvers and their hybrids are best for most home gardens. Blunt types such as Chantenay are best for heavy, compact soils. Long, pointed varieties, such as Imperator, are not recommended for home production unless the soil is very deep and loose. Soil compaction will cause forked, irregular roots, as will the use of fresh manure.
- Jerusalem artichokes grow profusely and spread so rapidly that they can become pests if not controlled. They also can reach eight feet in height, so it is important to plant them where they will not cast a shadow on other crops, unless shade is desired.
- Be on the lookout for a green vegetable called Parcel. It looks like parsley, but tastes like celery.
- Root crops must be thinned, no matter how ruthless this practice seems. Thin carrots, beets, parsnips and onions so you can get three fingers between individual plants.
- When the spring is very wet and the soil is too muddy to work, try planting your seed potatoes on top of the ground. Lay the cut seed flat on top of the wet earth with the eye up spaced in rows 24 inches apart and 12 inches apart in the row. Then cover them with 6 inches of oak leaves and water the leaves heavily enough to pack them so they won't blow off. This method saves digging a planting furrow, hilling and digging up the potatoes. Just pull back the leaves and there they are, nice and clean and not sunburned.
- Plastic jugs make inexpensive and easy-to-use "hot caps" for your vegetable seedlings. Remove the bottom inch of a plastic jug so that the sides are straight. Then cut around the jug below the handle, leaving a half-inch uncut piece under the handle as a hinge. Place the jug over a seedling, pushing it deep into the soil with the handle toward the prevailing wind. This reduces the chance of it blowing open. The jug serves as a "hot cap" to guard against frost, a translucent shield to prevent sun-scald and a wind barrier. When the plant is well established, the top can be folded back during the day and flipped into place when needed at night. When all danger of frost is past, cut off the top at the hinge, leaving the bottom to provide a reservoir for watering.
- If your garden space is limited, grow vegetables that are especially delicious and nutritious when homegrown, such as tomatoes and green, leafy vegetables. Also select those that bear for a long time, such as broccoli. Cucumbers and melons do well on a fence, if the fruit is supported by slings. And don't grow it, if your family won't eat it!
- 'Anuenue' lettuce is reported to be heat-resistant and able to germinate in warmer temperatures than most lettuces. Consider it for starting in the last, hot days of summer for a fall crop.

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- Reduce club root problems in your cabbage family crops by setting aside one section of the garden and liming it to a pH of 7.2 (based on soil test results.) It won't eliminate the disease, but it will improve your yields of cabbage, broccoli, collards, cauliflower and kale.
- Wild greens are often best in early spring when their flavor is mild. Common weeds that are edible include: pigweed, mustard, purslane, lambs quarter and dandelion greens. Harvesting these plants from your garden plot will benefit you doubly.
- Plant Swiss chard for a constant harvest of greens from spring until fall.
- The date of the last killing frost in your area can be used to calculate the approximate earliest and latest planting date for spring crops. Vegetable Planting Guide and Recommended Planting Dates can be used to determine planting dates and the average length of harvest for each crop. Harvest dates are particularly important if you also plan on having a fall garden.
- In the Piedmont and Mountain regions, this is the time to set out cool-weather vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce and onions. When the danger of frost has passed, transplant tomatoes, peppers and eggplant.
- When weather is wet or cold, allow about twice the germination time listed on the seed packet. If there is no sign of growth after this time, dig around a little to check for sprouted seeds. If you find no signs of life, the seed has probably rotted, and you will need to replant.
- When planning your vegetable garden, consider that leafy vegetables need at least six hours of sunlight to develop properly. Fruiting vegetables such as tomatoes, squash, eggplant and peppers need 10 hours of full sun.
- Due to a very thin seed coat and high sugar content, super sweet com varieties are very susceptible to cold soil conditions. Early plantings, when soil temperatures are below 65 degrees F, will not come up as consistently as regular sweet com. They are also susceptible to com root maggots and may require a pre-planting, soil insecticide treatment.
- For easier watering of tomatoes and other large vegetables, plant a gallon can with holes punched in the bottom nearby. Watering through the can keeps water off the top of the ground and puts it near the roots where it's needed.
- For faster growth of vegetables in containers, use black plastic pots to warm the soil (81 degrees F on sunny days compared to 72 degrees for the same mixes in clay or white plastic pots).
- Plant a bush-type, winter squash like Table Ace or Gold Nugget if your garden is small and you do not have adequate space for the long-vine varieties.
- Asparagus grows best in sandy loam soil. Set plants 18 inches apart in rows 4 to 5 feet apart, or in wide beds of 3 rows with plants 18 inches apart in all directions. Plants do well if set in a 8- to 10-inch-deep trench. (In heavier soils, the trench should only be 6 inches deep.) Place 2 inches of loose, organic soil in the trench, then set the plants. Cover the crowns with 2 to 3 inches of soil mixed with organic matter, such as shredded leaves. Firm well. As the plants grow, continue to pull soil over the crown (about 2 inches every 2 weeks) until the trench is filled.
- Swiss chard is a soft-textured, mild-flavored green. It will give repeated harvests all summer because it does not bolt and go to seed in hot weather like spinach. Swiss chard, especially the red cultivars like 'Rhubarb Chard', look beautiful and hold up well in flower arrangements.
- Home-made trellises can save space for vining vegetables. An A-frame cucumber trellis consists of two matched, ladder-like structures hinged together at the top; the two sections are staggered to allow nesting when stored.
- Delay organic mulching to allow soil to warm deeply, but act before weeds become established.

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- Quality bedding plants are sold already hardened off. Woody and yellow plants are over-hardened and will be slow to resume growth.
- Harden transplants of flowers and vegetables by decreasing water, fertilizer and growing temperatures. Transplant on a shady day in late afternoon or in early evening to reduce transplant shock. Water with a half-strength fertilizer solution. For a few days after transplanting, protect the plants from wind and sun by placing a piece of newspaper or cardboard on their south sides or by covering with jugs, baskets or flower pots. Water the plants once or twice during the next week.
- Some people report luck with beer as a pesticide for slugs. Place it in small, aluminum, pot-pie pans sunk in the ground with the soil even with the rim.
- When transplanting seedlings in peat pots to your garden, be careful not to allow the rim of the peat pot to protrude above the soil level. If the rim is above the soil level, it will act as a wick and draw moisture away from the transplant. To prevent this from happening, break away the uppermost rim of the pot before planting and make sure the pot is completely covered with soil.

Monthly Tips have been prepared since 1986 by various staff of the Office of Consumer Horticulture including Ellen Bennett, Michelle Buckstrup, Susan Day, Susan DeBolt, Sharon Dendy, Kate Dobbs, Sheri Dorn, David Gravell, Virginia Nathan, Jenny Shuster, Ellen Silva, and Ruth Sorenson. Resource material for the development of this information includes the Virginia Master Gardener Handbook; Extension Publications and newsletters from VCE, numerous other states, and the USDA; and an extensive library of over 900 books, magazines, and journals. Project funded by The Virginia Gardener Newsletter subscription fees. Diane Relf, Project Director and Content Specialist.

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