



July Tips

VEGETABLES

by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

- Show off your gardening abilities by exhibiting fresh vegetables, flowers, and fruits at local fairs. You might even win a blue ribbon.
- Continue to use *Bacillus thuringiensis* for caterpillar pests, such as imported cabbageworm. Follow directions for application on the label.
- Make successive plantings of beets, beans, and carrots to be able to harvest into fall. Direct seed cool-season crops, such as broccoli, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts, into the garden.
- Continue to monitor your squash vines for squash vine borers. The moths lay their eggs on the stems, and then the emerging larvae bore into the vines, causing the squash vine to wilt and die. Contact your local Extension agent for control recommendations.
- To obtain maximum pleasure and value from your vegetable garden, continue planting during the growing season. This provides a harvest until cold weather kills the plants.
- Uncaged tomatoes can be damaged by sunscald. To prevent this, lean an old window screen over the plants to protect them from the sun.
- Before you spray an insecticide on your vegetables, check the label. Each insecticide has a time you must wait before you can harvest.
- To prevent okra from becoming slimy while cooking, leave the stem on the pod. The stem is edible, or you can remove it before serving.
- Dry weather causes Swiss chard to bolt or go to seed. Water your plants to extend the season.
- Cucumbers develop a bitter taste if the soil is not kept consistently moist. Harvest for pickling whole when 2 to 4 inches; for table use, when longer than 5 inches. Remove any overripe cucumbers to encourage continuous production.
- For bigger and better Brussels sprouts, pinch out the top of the plant when sprouts at the bottom are fully grown. The smaller, upper sprouts will grow larger than they would otherwise.
- Okra, one of the showiest blooms in the vegetable garden, bears flowers that last only one day. If the flower has been pollinated, a miniature okra pod can be seen beneath the wilted flower.
- Leave the casaba melon on the vine until the blossom end softens and rind turns yellow. Crenshaw melon is ripe when the dark-green skin develops yellow streaks. Pick honeydew when the blossom end softens and white skin turns cream color.
- Most of your spring crops are out of the garden, and weeds are beginning to encroach on what once was a productive space. Plant another crop in those empty spaces to be harvested at the end of the growing season. Try beans, kale, turnips, mustard, broccoli, cabbage, spinach, or even com varieties that mature in a short season. Remember to restore fertility to the soil before planting your fall crops by working in a light layer of compost or aged manure or a small application of a complete chemical fertilizer.
- Shredded Chinese cabbage is a good, hot-weather substitute for lettuce in salads and sandwiches. A second

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crop may be started now for fall harvesting.

- Although tomatoes are self-pollinating, they need movement to transfer pollen. If it is hot and calm for several days, gently shake plants for assured pollen transfer and fruit set. Hot temperatures can also interfere with blossom set.
- Overwatered okra will produce more leaves than pods.
- Water stress in sweet potatoes can result in cracked roots. A potassium deficiency causes long, slender roots. Too much nitrogen reduces yield and quality.
- Drought and hot, dry winds can cause pepper and tomato blossoms to drop off. Try misting plants twice a day to cool them and help the blossoms set fruit.
- Too many cucumbers, zucchini, or tomatoes? Think pickles, relishes, and tomato sauces.
- Cucumbers have a very short "vine-storage time." Under warm, humid conditions, the fruits on the vine may remain in prime condition less than one day. So pick early and often.
- For the best flavor, pick ripe tomatoes as needed; flavor peaks within three minutes of picking. If you must wait to use garden-fresh tomatoes, don't refrigerate them. Fruit texture and some aroma compounds deteriorate quickly in the cold.
- You can prolong the storage life of fresh okra by dipping it in 500 ppm of ascorbic acid for five minutes. This concentration is approximately the same as dissolving 500 mg of vitamin C in a quart of water. Then air dry and pack in plastic bags for storage of up to one month in your refrigerator.
- To get more vitamins out of your vegetables, keep the outer leaves on your cabbage heads. They are high in vitamin C. Grow yellow com varieties; they are higher in vitamin A than those with white kernels. Wash, but don't peel, cucumbers -- most of the vitamin A is in the skin. Harvest some green leaves with broccoli heads and stalks; the leaves have more vitamin A than the head and are richer in vitamin C, too.
- Most fertilizer recommendations are for 100 square feet, so keep your garden's square footage a simple fraction of that. For example, a 4 x 12 1/2 foot garden is exactly 50 square feet and would require exactly one half the fertilizer required by a garden of 100 square feet.
- Intensive gardeners know that closely spaced plants may yield less per plant, but the yield per square foot is increased because so many more plants are grown. The same idea can be used in container gardening. USDA research has shown that tomatoes grown in 3 1/2-inch pots yielded smaller and fewer fruits than those grown in 11-inch pots, but the total yield per square foot was almost twice as high because three small pots could be grown in the space of one large pot.
- Try a slippery plastic fence for keeping raccoons out of vegetables, especially sweet com. Construct one by stapling plastic sheeting (6 mil thickness) to stakes spaced every 10 feet so that the stakes are on the inside of the plastic, toward the com. The plastic should be 30 to 36 inches wide, and the lowermost 3 to 6 inches should rest on the ground. If you already have a fence around your garden, try using spring-type clothespins to clip the plastic to it. Put the fence up shortly before the corn is ripe to give the animals less time to figure it out. Raccoons trying to climb the slippery plastic soon give up.
- A garden needs 1 inch of rain or water each week. Early morning is the best time to water. Evening watering is less desirable because leaves that remain wet through the night are more susceptible to fungal diseases. Mulch plants to reduce water loss and improve yields.
- Keep peas, beans, and berries cool while you pick them by spreading a damp cloth over your harvest basket.

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- For a fall harvest of cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts, set transplants in late July. For a fall harvest of lettuce, radish, carrots, beets, turnips, kale, and spinach, sow seeds in late July to early August.
- Fall is the best time to grow Brussels sprouts since their flavor is enhanced by a mild frost. Sow seeds directly in the garden early in the month, or set out transplants. Brussels sprouts are heavy feeders so make monthly applications of 5-10-10 fertilizer from the time the plants are 4 inches tall. Apply at a rate of 1/2 cup per square yard.
- In summer, dry soil may make working the soil difficult and inhibit seed germination. Plant your fall vegetables when the soil is moist after a rain, or water the area thoroughly the day before you plant. Seeds may be planted in a shallow trench to conserve moisture. Cover the seeds about twice as deeply as you do in the spring. Early maturing varieties are best for late plantings.
- Gardeners in the mountainous regions of Virginia should start planting fall vegetables this month. Request publication #426-334, Fall Vegetable Gardening, from your Extension agent for guidelines on planning and planting fall crops.
- One of the most important advantages of the home garden is the opportunity to have high-quality vegetables. Harvest your vegetables at the peak of maturity. Don't allow them to become too old before you pick them. Harvest summer squash when it's about 6 inches long. Use sweet corn as soon as it is picked. If it is held under warm conditions, the sugar changes to starch, and the corn is much poorer in quality.
- Stop vine crops from taking over your garden or lawn by pinching off the fuzzy growing tips. This also directs the plant's energy into ripening fruit rather than producing more vines.
- Implement all the best cultural practices to reduce pest problems, but be prepared to spray as needed to control insects and diseases. Some pest control usually is necessary to insure the production of healthful, high-quality vegetables.
- Swiss chard can out produce the gardener. If it becomes over mature, cut it back to about 4 inches. After cutting, it will send out tender, new leaves.
- Plant Chinese cabbage in July about 90 days before the average date of the first fall frost in your locality. This will allow crisp, firm heads to form in the cool days of early autumn.
- Side dress crops like corn and cabbage with 2 pounds of 5-10-5 fertilizer per 50 feet of row about a month after growth starts. Scatter the fertilizer between the rows and scratch it into the soil with a rake. If your garden is on an infertile sandy soil, side-dress all of your vegetables to promote vigorous growth.
- If your potatoes are visible along the soil surface, the portion exposed to light will turn green. Green-skinned potatoes will taste bitter and can cause sickness, so protect tubers from light by covering them with soil or mulch.
- Withhold water on storage potatoes when they begin to die down. Water and fertilizer late in the season may disturb dormancy necessary for good storage. They can cause regrowth or cause potatoes to crack prior to harvest.
- When muskmelons are 1/3 to 1/2 their mature size, decrease watering. Overwatering reduces sweetness and may cause the fruits to crack open. From half-size to maturity, 1 inch of water per week from rainfall or overhead irrigation is plenty. Likewise, trickle irrigation should be reduced.
- Dried onion flower heads make marvelous additions to winter flower arrangements. For this reason, you may want to allow some buds that appear in your onion patch to develop instead of pinching

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them out as is useful to ensure large bulbs.

- Continue to make successive plantings of crops like beans, beets, cabbage, and sweet corn to provide a continuous harvest until fall. A small garden will produce a large quantity of vegetables if replanting is done throughout the summer.
- Pumpkin and squash blossoms are both beautiful and edible. To prepare squash or pumpkin blossoms, pick them after they open. Remove insects and dirt by washing and draining. Dip the blossoms in batter and fry until golden.
- Ornamental kales and cabbage are among the showiest of all winter plants, and as the weather cools, the color intensifies. Transplants of these beautiful winter ornamentals are available at garden centers and nurseries now.
- Summer squash with a bitter taste should not be eaten as it may contain a natural toxin, cucurbitacin E that can cause food poisoning symptoms, such as stomach cramps. Often these fruits are a result of self-seeded plants. Avoid this problem by not saving self-seeded squash plants.
- Turning cabbage a quarter to a half turn if they start to crack will reduce the water uptake that causes splitting. Or use a shovel to cut through the roots on one side of the plant. If that doesn't work, better harvest them.
- Daytime temperatures above 90 degrees F prevent snap bean flowers from developing.
- Begin to sow cover crops between rows and in vacated beds now. Sow clover, rye, and vetch. These will return humus and nitrates to the soil when dug under later.

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 Dom, 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

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