SEVEN MISTAKES BEGINNER (AND EXPERIENCED) VEGETABLE GARDENERS MAKE

David Muns, Frederick County Master Gardener

Before beginning to plant, it is a good time to think about the biggest mistakes first-time gardeners - and more than a few experienced ones - have made.

Not planning ahead what to plant. Consider what you like to eat, what you have room for, what can be grown fairly easily, and how long it will be in your garden before you can harvest it. Corn, for example, takes a lot of room, and must be planted in fairly large blocks for pollination, gets lots of insect damage, and can shade other crops.

Trying to fit too much into your plot. Overcrowding is a common problem. Follow the seed packet guidelines. Just because three tomato plants come in one cell of a cell pack does not mean that they all should be planted together. Pay attention to space recommendations (see UMD Extension printout #HG16 at end) and enjoy heavier yields off fewer, healthier plants.

Not enriching the soil. Feed the soil, not the plant. Dig deeply and add compost, dried leaves, dry grass clippings, and kitchen scraps – bury scraps deeply for the worms.

Starting too early or too late. Soil temperature is critical. Cold tolerant crops such as lettuce, spinach, brassicas, Asian veggies, peas, potatoes, chard, and radishes will be first. Warm season crops - beans, tomatoes, squash, peppers, and eggplant - will go in after the soil temperature reaches the 70's. Plan for a fall crop with cool season veggies. Soil temperatures are in the 30's now so even if you see tomatoes and peppers for sale, wait to purchase or realize you will not be able to plant them outside until after the last frost date in May.

Giving less effort as the weather warms up. It's going to get hot, dry, and weedy. Plan on it so you will have the energy to continue when gardening gets difficult. Straw mulch helps keep the soil cool and controls weeds. (No straw on warm weather crops till the plants set fruit.)

Not watering regularly when needed. Water deeply rather than often. Do not wet the leaves of any plant to help control spread of viruses. Hydrant water is pond water: NOT potable! Water consistently as plants grow. Raised beds will help conserve water.

Not reacting quickly to problems in the garden. When bugs are taking over, early or late blight is hitting the tomatoes, weeds are sprouting (especially clover, Johnson grass, groundsel, and Canadian thistle). Look online for identification. Dig weeds out including the root, and compost if recommended, for instance do not compost seed heads or perennial roots unless you are certain they will not be able to reproduce. Remember there are beneficial bugs. (Integrated Pest Management -IPM) Look up beneficials for identification.
For help with all these issues:
- Go to Grow It, Eat It (GIEI) at growit.umd.edu
- Ask the experts at Home and Garden Information Center (HGIC) 1-800-342-2507
- Visit a Master Gardener Plant Clinic every Saturday (11am - 2pm, 3/8 - 5/17) at the Extension Office at 330 Montevue Lane in Frederick. We will have mini plant clinics at FNP with our 8 Master Gardeners who have plots.
- Sign up for "What Can We Do For You" a free monthly brochure e-newsletter at: fgardenersnews@gmail.com
- Attend our next free MG seminar about vegetables "Beginning Vegetable Gardening" on Wednesday, April 9, 7 pm - 9 pm at the extension office. Learn from the best!
- Print out instructional documents from www.hgic.umd.edu Print # HG16, "Planting Dates for Vegetable Crops in Maryland" - includes planting dates, depth to plant, and planting distances in rows.

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland
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