



FOOD & FARMS

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KING COUNTY HOME

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #02

Deciding What to Plant in Your Garden

One of the first jobs a gardener needs to do is to decide what crops to grow. This is fun, but it's also serious business. Unfortunately, we can't grow everything we might like in a small, backyard garden or in a community garden plot. Your first consideration should be what do you and your family like to eat. Other important factors to think about are the value of the crop and its nutrition.

Value & Nutrition of Crop

Vegetable value can be due to either a high price per pound or a high yield of produce. Vegetables highest in value for the space they take up are:

1. Tomatoes, grown up supports to save space
2. Rhubarb
3. Green bunching onions
4. Leaf lettuce
5. Turnips, for greens and roots
6. Summer squash: zucchini, scallop and yellow types
7. Asparagus
8. Edible podded peas
9. Onion bulbs for storage
10. Beans, pole or runner types (green or wax pod)
11. Beets, grown for green tops and roots
12. Beans, bush (green or wax pod)
13. Carrots
14. Cucumbers, grown up supports to save space
15. Peppers, sweet or bell
16. Broccoli
17. Kohlrabi
18. Swiss chard
19. Mustard greens
20. Spinach

At the bottom of the list are potatoes, Brussels sprouts, celery, corn, winter squash and melons. Other veggies are in between.

Nutrition

People have lots of reasons for gardening. Whatever our primary motivation, nutrition should be at least a secondary one. Unfortunately, most gardeners seem to give little thought to nutrition. A few years ago, a Gallup poll done for the National Gardening Association showed that none of the 10 most popular vegetables grown by American gardeners are among the 10 most nutritious that they could grow.

Actually how you define "most nutritious" is up for debate. American Health magazine (May '87) came up with their rating (below left) after looking at concentrations of protein, calcium, iron, vitamin A, vitamin C, potassium, phosphorous, thiamin, riboflavin and niacin. The Center for Science in the Public Interest created a score for each vegetable by adding up the percent of the RDA (recommended daily allowance) for six nutrients vitamins A & C, folate, iron, copper and calcium. Vegetables are an important source of fiber and they felt fiber should influence the ratings. There is no RDA for fiber, so they assigned it one.

Their list is the column on the right below.

American Health Magazine May 1987	Center for Science in the Public Interest
1. Collard greens	1. Sweet potatoes
2. Shelled beans (like limas)	2. Carrots
3. Peas	3. Spinach
4. Spinach	4. Collards
5. Sweet potatoes	5. Red bell pepper
6. Turnip greens	6. Kale
7. Winter squash	7. Broccoli
8. Broccoli	8. Brussels sprouts
9. Kale	9. Potatoes
10. Brussels sprouts	10. Winter squash
11. Mustard greens	11. Swiss chard
12. Swiss chard	12. Snow peas
13. Tomatoes	13. Mustard greens
14. Corn	14. Kohlrabi
15. Beet greens	15. Cauliflower
16. Potatoes	16. Asparagus
17. Carrots & Parsnips	17. Green bell pepper
18. Summer squash	18. Peas
19. Cauliflower	19. Romaine
20. Green beans	20. Endive

The lists are very different, but there are some similarities too. Look at all the leafy greens on both lists and both lists contain those orange, vitamin A powerhouses --sweet potatoes, carrots, and winter squash. Don't worry too much about exactly where a vegetable placed on the list, after all, these are all winners.

Are you growing crops that aren't on these lists? Tomatoes, peppers and green beans, the top three most popular garden vegetables, each only made one of the lists. Cucumbers, onions and lettuce, the next three most popular crops, aren't here at all. Neither are radishes, beets and turnip roots, eggplant or celery .

I admit to skipping okra, cantaloupe and avocados in reprinting these lists, since local gardeners are not likely to grow much of these crops. I left sweet potatoes in as a challenge. It did so well that perhaps we should be trying harder to grow some of the cultivars adapted to cool climates. I also skipped parsley, which appears in the teens on both lists. Most of us don't eat much parsley, though perhaps we should!

Choose varieties developed to grow well in our area. In some cases, the wrong variety can give you poor results, even if you do everything else right.

Also see fact sheet on Seed and Nursery Catalogs.

Advice for Beginners

Don't try to grow more than about 8 vegetables in your first garden. With experience, a couple more can be added each year as gardening skill and confidence grows.

New gardeners may want to try the easiest vegetables and avoid the ones that are more difficult to grow here. The vegetables in the easy list are mostly ones which are fairly quick to mature as well. Fast-growing vegetables are good choices when gardening with children, who often don't have a lot of patience. Aids (such as raised beds, cloches, cold frames and row covers) will also help.

Easy Beets	Difficult Cauliflower
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bush beans	celery
collards	eggplant
green onions	lima beans
kale	melons
leaf lettuce	okra
mustard greens	peppers
radishes	sweet potatoes
peas	
summer squash	
Swiss chard	
turnips	

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