



June Tips

VEGETABLES

by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

- Precision placement of fertilizer in the row near the root zone of vegetable plants reduces fertilization costs, does not stimulate between-row weed growth, and may help reduce fertilizer contamination of run-off water. Side-dressing, a technique to fertilize established vegetable crops, is beneficial for adding fertilizer when it is most needed by the crop.
- If weed plants are mature, plan to weed your garden early in the morning when moisture is present to prevent the seed heads from shattering and dropping weed seeds in the garden.
- Cucumbers have a very short "vine storage time." Under warm, humid conditions, fruits on the vine may remain in prime condition for less than 12 hours. For the best tasting cukes, pick early and often. The fruits can be stored for up to two weeks at 45 to 50 degrees F and 95 percent relative humidity. Lower temperatures cause chilling damage, and higher temperatures encourage yellowing. Yellowing is also accelerated if cucumbers are stored with tomatoes or apples.
- To make a produce cleaning station, replace the bottom of a wooden box with half-inch hardware cloth or chicken wire. Place fresh-picked vegetables in the box and rinse them off in the garden so the soil remains there. Only final cleaning will be necessary indoors.
- Kohlrabi is a swollen, edible stem with leaves around the sides. It must be harvested when only 2 or 3 inches in diameter to secure the succulent, tender quality.
- Where space is limited, walls of the patio, fences, and even the house or garage can be used to support trellises for melons, cucumbers, squash, and pumpkins. To support the fruits and keep them from weighing down the vines, devise cradles of netting or pantyhose slings, or tack temporary shelves beneath heavier fruits.
- After watering, the soil in the vegetable garden should be moist to a depth of 8 to 10 inches. If the moisture is not that deep, evaluate your watering technique.
- Yellow crook-neck or straight-neck squash tastes best when 4 to 7 inches long. Pick when pale yellow (rather than golden) and before skin hardens. Scalloped (patty pan) squash is best when grayish or greenish white (before it turns ivory white) and is still small, even silver-dollar size.
- Remove cucumbers by turning fruits parallel to the vine and giving a quick snap. This prevents vine damage and results in a clean break. If you have trouble mastering this, take a sharp knife to the garden for harvesting. Cut or pull cucumbers, leaving a short stem on each fruit.
- If you need to mark a plant or small area in your garden for future reference (i.e., for transplanting or spraying for disease or insects), lay a line of lime, sand or compost where you need to mark. You will have a visible, but temporary, marker that will remain for days as long as it doesn't rain hard. Choose the material your garden needs most, and you will also be improving your soil.
- Drought or hot, dry winds can cause pepper blossoms to drop. Mist plants with water twice a day to help retain blossoms and set fruit.
- Seedless watermelons require special care for good germination. They usually do best sown indoors and set out soon after germination. To avoid disturbing the roots, sow seeds in individual peat pots. Avoid excess water during germination by allowing the medium to drain for 24 hours before sowing.

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Cover with clear plastic to avoid having to re-water. Maintain a warm temperature - 85 degrees F during germination, 75 degrees F after growth emerges. Set out after one or two true leaves appear.

- Keep watermelon and cantaloupe well watered when growing, but on the dry side when fruit is ripening.
- To keep your cauliflower heads pure white, layer several of the long, outside leaves onto the flat, open head. Secure the leaves together with a clothespin or two toothpicks in the form of an "X" until the head is ready for harvesting.
- It's time to start Brussels sprouts transplants. For a change, try one of the colorful, new varieties. 'Teal' has dark green, almost bluish, sprouts. 'Rubine' has ruby-red sprouts. Both are as attractive in the garden as they are on the plate.
- If you would like to garden on an herbicide-treated area, but are unsure of whether residual herbicide will damage your plants, try sowing tomato and ryegrass seed in soil from the plot. If they grow well and produce their first true leaves, residual herbicides will not be a problem.
- Salt hay, if available in your area, is excellent mulch for vegetables and strawberries during the heat of summer. It is stiff and does not mat down, making it a good insulator. With mulch and the growing plants shading the ground, expect a cooler soil temperature and conservation of moisture.
- Set young melons and cantaloupes atop tin cans -they'll ripen faster, be sweeter and have less insect damage than those left on the ground.
- After your vegetable garden is well established, it is best to water it thoroughly once a week rather than giving it a light watering everyday. That way, a deeper root system is encouraged that will help the plants tolerate dry weather. Generally, an application of one inch of water to the surface will wet the soil to six or eight inches deep.
- According to tests conducted by the Virginia Tech Department of Human Nutrition and Foods, microwave- blanched vegetables have less flavor and poorer color and texture than vegetables blanched with hot water or steam.
- Some Virginia soils are magnesium deficient, especially those with high-calcium lime rather than lime containing magnesium (dolomite) added. "Green" your peppers by giving them magnesium boost with Epsom salts. This will also aid in fruit production. Dilute one tablespoon of Epsom salts in a quart of water. Spray the solution on leaves using a clean household spray bottle.
- Broken branches and suckers of tomato plants will often root if stuck into loose, moist soil.
- The time of day vegetables are harvested can make a difference in the taste and texture. For sweetness, pick peas and corn late in the day. That's when they contain the most sugar, especially if the day was cool and sunny. Other vegetables, such as lettuce and cucumbers, are crisper and tastier if you harvest them early in the morning before the day's heat has a chance to wilt and shrivel them.
- Keep a close eye on the quality of your spring crops. Hot weather causes lettuce to bolt and become bitter. Plant a warm- season crop as soon as the spring vegetables are removed.
- Stop cutting asparagus in mid- or late June when the spears become thin. After the last cutting is made, fertilize by broadcasting a 10-10-10 formula at the rate of 2 lbs. per 100 sq. ft. Allow the tops to grow during the summer to store food in the roots for the crop next spring.
- Add organic mulch to the vegetable garden when your seedlings are about six inches tall. This will conserve moisture and discourage weeds. Make sure the soil is moist, and the area is free of weeds before adding mulch.

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- Avoid side dressing tomatoes, eggplants and peppers with fertilizer until they have set their first fruit.
- For very efficient, steady feeding of vegetables, sink a large can or bucket with many holes in its sides into the soil and fill it about 2/3 full of rotted manure or compost. Rain or occasional watering will keep a rich supply of nutrients seeping out to feed plants in a circle several feet wide.
- Corn earworm may be controlled by using mineral oil. A few drops on the silk at the time of first pink blush, followed by daily applications for heavy infestations, will stop them. An added bonus is the ease with which the silks may be removed when shucking the ears. However, over-use of mineral oil will adversely affect pollination, and the silk end of the ear will not completely fill out.
- In most cases, blossom-end rot on tomatoes, peppers, squash and watermelons may be prevented by maintaining uniform soil moisture by mulching and watering correctly, planting in well-drained soil and not cultivating deeper than one inch within one foot of the plant. Also avoid the use of high-nitrogen fertilizers.
- Corn needs water at two crucial times: when the tassels at the top are beginning to show, and when the silk is beginning to show on the ear. If weather is dry at these times, water.
- To avoid the disappointment of finding a weedy, overgrown garden when you return from vacation, hire a garden sitter. Young neighbors might enjoy making a few dollars by weeding and watering. Adults may be willing to cooperate in exchange for fresh produce.
- For bigger and better Brussels sprouts, pinch out the top of the plant when the sprouts at the bottom are full grown. The smaller, upper sprouts are thus encouraged to grow larger than they otherwise would.
- An edible green called tyfon has been developed by crossing turnips with Chinese cabbage. Tyfon is frost tolerant, quick growing and capable of generating a second cutting in three to four weeks. Its mild leaves may be used in salads or as cooked greens.
- Continue plantings of warm-season crops, such as beans, squash and tomatoes. Toward the end of the month, start seeds of Chinese cabbage and cauliflower for fall harvest.
- Only the uppermost ear or two develops to maturity in sweet corn. Any undeveloped, lower ears can be picked just after the silks appear and used in stir-fry vegetables, salads or pickles.
- If you are using transplants for a late-season planting of tomatoes, it is possible that the plants have reached a physiological stage of growth in which some flowers may be forming or even open at transplanting time. This can occur both in home-grown and purchased transplants. One problem with setting out plants with flowers or small fruit is the plants tend to mature one or more small fruit at the expense of desired vegetative growth. Thus, the plants remain fairly small, and their yield is low. If time and labor are available, remove flowers and fruit at transplanting.

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 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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