



August Tips

VEGETABLES

by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

- Whenever possible, choose early maturing vegetables for the fall garden. They can be planted after the early summer vegetables have been harvested and still be ready to pick before freezing weather.
- To fry green tomatoes, slice, dip in flour (or flour and cornmeal), sprinkle with salt, and fry in a little butter until tender.
- An eggplant is ready to harvest when the fruit is fully colored and has achieved the mature size for the variety. Seed should be white, and the tissue firm. If the seeds are brown and hard, the fruit is past eating quality, so harvest the next fruit sooner.
- The heat of summer makes radishes turn very hot and pithy. Try the European radish. It remains sweet and solid, not pithy. Tops are very tall, averaging 12 inches in length.
- Stop vine crops from taking over your garden and lawn by pinching off the fuzzy growing tips. This also directs the plant's energy into ripening fruit rather than producing more vines.
- The first step in escaping major pest problems in the garden is to choose carefully the crops you plant. Plant resistant varieties and use pest-free stocks. Most herbs are essentially pest free, as are beet, chard, Chinese cabbage, lettuce, radish, and pea. Mustard, spinach, and sweet potato have few and minor problems.
- Seeds from mature or over mature peppers have higher viability and faster germination than do seeds from unripe peppers. While it is possible to obtain viable seed from peppers harvested while green by allowing them to ripen (several weeks to two months) before removing seeds, it is preferable to collect ripe or overripe peppers when harvesting for seed.
- According to researchers at Purdue University, most mature "orange" tomatoes contain more carotene, a pigment that is converted to vitamin A in the liver, than their red counterparts. But the public hasn't caught on yet. In tomato juice taste tests, most people preferred the red product over the orange-red, high carotene blend, though the flavors tested to be identical.
- Before storing root crops like carrots and beets, cut off the green tops. The leaves transpire pulling moisture out of the roots, thus drying them out.
- Watering properly is the key to conserving water in the heat of summer. One inch per week applied at one time will wet the soil 6 to 8 inches deep and insure good yield from your mature crops. Two inches of organic mulch will cool the soil and reduce surface evaporation of water.
- If you are harvesting and must leave your produce outdoors for several hours, provide some shade to keep the fresh foods succulent and reduce the conversion of sugars to starch.
- If going on vacation this month, be sure to harvest all your vegetables and then arrange for someone to pick fast-maturing crops, such as squash and okra; otherwise, they will become over mature and stop producing.
- Pinch off onion flower buds from the top of the plant to direct all of the plant's energy into the developing bulb instead of seed production.
- Roots of vine crops, like cucumbers and melons, usually extend as far as the vines and sometimes farther when grown in friable garden soil. Use caution when cultivating around these crops.

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- Harvest winter squash and pumpkins by cutting with 2 or 3 inches of stem; they'll keep better in storage that way than if stemless.
- Mound soil over the lateral or brace roots of corn stalks for extra support against strong winds.
- When cantaloupes reach softball size, place them on an inverted coffee can to increase the air circulation and sunlight they receive. Puncture drainage holes on the can top to prevent fruit rot.
- An old-time trick for germinating seeds in mid-summer is to plant the seeds, water them well, and then place a board over the row until the sprouts just reach the soil surface. At that time, remove the board.
- Plant a winter cover crop to enrich your garden soil. Annual rye, red clover, and hairy vetch are good choices.
- A cover crop decreases erosion of the soil during the winter, adds organic material when it is incorporated in the spring, improves soil tilth and porosity, and adds valuable nutrients. Winter cover crops can be planted as early as August 1, but should not be planted any later than November 1.
- Where you have fall crops growing you can sow cover crop seed between rows a month or less before expected harvest. This way the cover crop gets a good start, but will not interfere with vegetable plant growth.
- Pick summer squash and zucchini every day or two to keep the plants producing.
- Remove old plants that have stopped producing to eliminate shelters for insects and disease organisms.
- Potatoes continue to grow as long as the tops are green. Dig only as many as you need for immediate use. The tubers will keep better in the ground than in a warm, dry home.
- The last, fall garden vegetables should be planted in August in most sections of Virginia. For hardy crops like cabbage, cauliflowers, and collards, count back from your average first frost date the number of days the particular variety requires to mature and plant at that time. For half-hardy crops like beets and carrots, allow an additional week. For tender crops like beans and sweet corn, allow an extra two weeks to be sure an early frost does not kill your vegetables before they mature.
- Snap bean, tomato, and pepper flowers may fail to develop fruit when daytime temperatures rise above 90° F.
- It's not too late to plant a fall garden. Lettuce, radishes, spinach, turnip, and peas can be started from seed. Chinese cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower transplants will still have time to produce a good harvest. Be extra diligent in watching for pests on these crops.
- Here is a quick-and-easy method for reducing your slug population, especially if you are squeamish about the little devils: put out squares of cardboard in your garden each night. In the morning, pick them up, and if there are any slugs clinging to the underside, discard the whole square in a trash bag. The number and size of the squares depend on the size of your garden and how heavy the infestation of slugs. No need for the messy and tedious process of hand picking each one.
- Water the garden early in the day so the foliage dries before night. Wet foliage at night increases susceptibility to fungus diseases.

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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