

Garden Time

by Forrest Shafer

It's that time of year again, the days are getting shorter, cooler weather could show up any day, and the vegetable gardening season is underway. Experienced or not, it may seem impossible to get any vegetables to grow at all in the constant 90 degree heat, but somehow the large organic growers like Worden farm seem to have early produce mature enough for market already. How do they do it? What is their secret? Can the home gardener achieve the same results without all the equipment that these producers use? Well the short answer is absolutely yes. Understanding timing is the key to this success. Let's explore some strategies for Growing the best home veggies in southwest FL.

Know your seasons, and know your crops. Timing is everything. Knowing when to plant and what crops to plant in FL is, in my experience, not common knowledge. In fact, after having run an Organic Produce farm in Pennsylvania for 10 years, it took some trial and error to figure out the seasons here. The Florida growing season is from September through May. The peak harvest times being January through April. In sequence, plantings go from summer vegetables, to cool weather fall crops, back to summer vegetable again, and if we don't get a freeze you might get summer crops the whole season.

Obtain the right variety of Vegetable Seeds to begin with. You wouldn't want to attempt raising seeds bred for growing zone 4, basically Canada, when we are most definitely in subtropical zone 9. Once you find the right breed for south FL you're chances of success increase drastically. Check out Southern Seed Savers Exchange for some tried and true heat tolerant varieties.

Find that Shade. If you decide to start plants from seed, you'll need a uv filter such as shade cloth to protect your starts from the scalding sun. Your seedlings will be most vulnerable to mid to late day sun, so put them in a location that gets early morning direct sun and gets shade by mid afternoon. The same goes for your Garden location. Try to cut out as much of the late day sun as possible. Use shade cloth if needed. This is tricky because most crops like tomatoes , onions, peppers, etc. need at very least

6-8 hours of direct sun per day. So try to capture as much of that as early day sunlight if possible.

Irrigation is critical in our extreme sandy soil. Large scale growers not only use in row drip tape irrigation with liquid fertilizer injection, but they also use plastic mulch fabric that can deflect harmful uv rays and keep plants cooler. As a home gardener you're most likely not going to go to these extremes to grow a tomato plant or three. However, the home grower has advantages too, such as heavy mulch applications at the time of planting to retain moisture in the soil. Watering will become an every day , sometimes twice a day event , but for a small garden this is some of the most relaxing time spent. Try not to overwater, and don't water too late in the day if possible, both these things can cause plant diseases to spread rapidly.

You can't grow anything well without Fertilizer. Just like you and me, vegetable plants need a constant supply of nutrients and minerals. Firstly, bulk up on compost as much as possible. Layer 8-12 inches of pure compost over cardboard for instant results. You will need a steady supply of compost each year for continued results. With the low light conditions of our winter growing season, not only do plants need constant feedings, but they need an instant water soluble form of fertilizer, especially Nitrogen. This can easily be obtained from a liquid fish emulsion application once a week. Also add an organic source of potash from kelp, green sand or sulfate of potash and Azomite powder for an awesome mineral boost. Check out MRT nursery for the best organic fertilizers, Super Plus by fertrell is my favorite.

If you learned something from this article than hurray ! If not, your like me and still have more questions than answers. Florida vegetable growing is a tricky course to navigate. Even if you do everything right the critters, pests and diseases could ruin all your hard work in a short time. My best advice is to keep trying and don't give up because each seasons' conditions are totally different and unpredictable. Gardening is a practice and a meditation. If you want quick and easy, go to the farmers market and buy the veggies from a local producer. But I assure you it won't be nearly as gratifying, or as delicious as harvesting your own fresh backyard bounty. Happy Gardening ! Good Luck!