



**Spring Vegetable Gardening-Planning & Preparation**  
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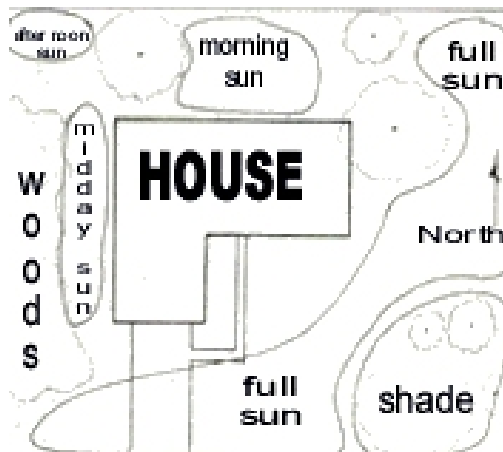
According to local forecasts, the weather will be beautiful this week. Daytime temperatures will be in the 70's, at least until Friday or so. Rain is also expected, completing the illusion of much needed relief from the unexpected, and unaccustomed, winter blasts that we have been experiencing even in south central Florida. It seems like spring might actually be on its way and many gardeners are eager to get their hands dirty planting the spring garden. Don't be fooled though. This week is a reprieve from the cool temperatures but it is just that, a reprieve. We still have at least 2 more weeks of possible freezing temperatures and given the cold winter that we have had here in Indian River County I don't think that we should put anything in the ground until the second week of March. Now I know that this might be disappointing for most, but that does not mean that you cannot start preparing for your spring vegetable garden. In fact, there is quite a lot of work to be done in the meantime and you can still enjoy the wonderful weather.



One of the first things that a vegetable gardener needs to do is prepare the garden area and order seeds. If you are the type of gardener who can walk into a garden center and buy seedlings and plants then you are all set in this regard. Many of the garden centers will have vegetable plants appropriate for our area waiting for you with their bright, shiny leaves and tiny flowers just a few weeks away from tiny fruit. But for those of you who enjoy spending hours poring over seed catalogs, you might have little time left to make your selections before it is time to get them in the ground. Last year I waited until early March to make my order and even with the speed of the internet I was too late to get some of the heat-tolerant sunflower seeds that I wanted to try. Some earlier bird got my worm and I had to wait a whole year to order them again since the seed company's supply had been depleted since early February. It seems strange that we Floridians might spend cooler winter nights drooling over seed catalogs and dreaming of warmer weather like they do up north but this winter has been unusually cold. When you are ordering seeds from a catalog make sure that they are appropriate for our plant zone which is 9b. This information comes from the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map which divides the U.S. into zones based upon their average annual minimum temperature. Seeds selected for zones outside of 9a or 9b might not grow very well here given the warmer temperatures.

Another thing that gardeners can, and should, do right now is begin to prepare the garden site. This does take some time and labor to do it right, but all your efforts will be worth it when you are harvesting your own tomatoes. Speaking of tomatoes, given the freezes that we have had this winter and the restaurant signs that are warning us that they cannot find tomatoes for some menu items, planting tomatoes this year will be very important. Tomato prices will probably be higher than normal once they are back in the market and planting a few in the garden will help keep your grocery bill down. One of the most important things that you can do when preparing your garden is to take a soil sample in to the extension office for testing. Testing, and determining, the soil pH from your garden can help you avoid costly problems and reduce pests and diseases. Knowing the pH of your soil will give you the knowledge you will need when selecting the types of vegetables that you want to grow and what type of fertilizer to use. Most vegetables grow best in a soil pH of 5.8-6.5. Unfortunately, with just a few exceptions, the pH's in our county are quite high—usually 6.8-8, which is very basic. At a pH that high, nutrients and minerals are tied up with the soil particles and cannot be released for the plant to take up. The soil must be modified in some way to lower the pH. Most county extension offices will test your soil pH for free or for a nominal fee and we have trained Master Gardener Volunteers on staff to help you with any questions that you might have. For information on how to take a good soil sample go to <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/SS/SS49400.pdf>

After taking your soil samples you are ready to layout your garden on paper, stake out the garden area and minimally till the soil. Vegetables will need at least six plus hours of sunlight and so placement of the garden location is very important. When laying out your garden on paper, make sure that taller plants are placed behind shorter plants so all plants receive necessary sunlight. Avoid shady spots, wet or excessively dry areas, high traffic paths or near the septic tank as these will cause problems for the garden once the plants have begun to grow. Place your garden near a water source and convenient to the home so that it is not difficult for family members to do a little work every day. About one month before placing seeds or plants into the garden plot, you can turn the soil, and mix-in compost, decomposing leaves, grass clippings and other organic matter. This will add much-needed minerals and nutrients as well as tilth to the soil and help to retain water. Soil can be turned very lightly, to about 6-8" deep, but only if it has never been tilled before and you are just trying to prep the rows. Turning any soil will uncover weed seeds that will begin to germinate as soon as conditions are favorable, so you don't want to dig too deep. Our sandy soils are fragile, and excessive tillage will breakdown its delicate structure. If it does not rain, water-in lightly to help with the decomposition process and check periodically to make sure that the organic matter is breaking down.



If you are going to purchase plants from a garden center then you are set to wait out the cold weather until it is warm enough to plant outdoors. If you are going to plant from seed, it is recommended that you germinate your seeds indoors first and then plant into the garden. Now would be the time to start placing seeds in germinating cups and they will be big enough in a month or so to put into the ground. Many rodents (especially squirrels!) will dig into your garden just for the seeds but will not bother the plantlets once they are a bit bigger. One year I did not have anything germinating in the garden because my neighborhood squirrels ravished my neatly planted rows once I turned my back on them. I have learned to plant larger seedlings and this seems to have deterred some of them .... at least for now. Of course there are other critters that will get into your garden but I will discuss this in a later column. There are many different types of germinating cups but the one that I like to use is an empty toilet paper roll cut in half. You can make it into a small cylinder by cutting four slits at one end and folding them into each other like the flaps of a box, add soil, seeds, water and you are ready to go. These recyclable germination cups can be placed right into the garden once the seeds have germinated and they will disintegrate and become organic matter for the soil.



Next week we will talk about what to do if your soil pH is too acidic or too alkaline and how to amend it so it is more appropriate for your vegetables. So get your soil sample in this week, order your seeds and let's plan that garden!

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