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Fast-Growing Plants for Impatient Gardeners

By Armani Tavares

For those of us who suffer from a chronic condition known as impatience, here are some plants that I can recommend growing. They’re easy, they’re fast, and they’re what make up a bountiful garden harvest in only a month.

First place has to go to green onions grown from sets. That’s right. They can go into the ground, and that’s most any ground, at almost any time of the year, they are the earliest thing I harvest in regards to both days to maturity, and how early they can be planted. Plant them as soon as you can work the soil in spring, all the way through the year until freeze up. You’ll have a harvest from the sets in as early as two weeks, varying due to the time of year and depth planted. I like mine planted deep, around four inches, as to get longer white stalks (or red when I plant red onion sets). If you have some mechanism for creating furrows, that’s great, but I dig a trench with a hoe or heavy rake and place the sets as close as possible to each other down the length of it. Then push the dirt back over, water, and you’re done.

Second place is taken by radishes. I personally never liked radishes very much, that is, for eating. But they’re great for growing and if you plant all the different colored ones, white, red, purple, and pink, they’re just plain fun, and quite attractive. I grow them because of that. Of course I figure out some place to use them, usually salads. Some varieties can be harvested in as early as 18 days, such as Saxa II, offered by Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds.

Types will produce a harvest in as early as two or three weeks. They are also very easy to grow, not giving much time for problems to show up! There are all sorts of options here: Kale, mustard, lettuce, arugula, spinach, cress, mizuna, tat soi, and pac choi all make great salad greens that pass the one-month to harvest test. You can create the best salads yourself, and wow is it rewarding.

Kale. Surprise! From The Territorial Seed Company offers a variety, Wild Garden Kales, which offers a wonderful array of shapes and colors of Siberian kales. It has a days-to-maturity of 30 days—it passes the test. I love growing kale, and the earlier, the better. Super-food nutritious and my favorite green for adding to stews and such dishes. Also great made into kale chips, made by marinating the kale leaves, stripped from the stalks and torn into bite-sized pieces, in a concoction of your choice (something like salt, pepper, vinegar/lemon juice) then baking in the oven at the lowest possible temp until dry and crisp all the way through.

Another crop that barely passes is a variety of bok choi named Shiro. It’s available from Johnny’s Selected Seeds. Shiro is a “baby,” single serving bok choi. These Asian vegetables deserve greater publicity due to their relative ease of growing and adaptability. It does best in cool weather but tolerates year-round production. They have a mild, mustard greens-like flavor, though much crispier.

Everything listed above will produce satisfactorily in your average garden without special care, yet can provide extra special rewards within a month’s time of sowing. You know, when you’re caring for your garden day in and day out, mopping-wet with sweat under the scorching sun while weeding some plants—plants that by now you’ve almost forgotten are for eating—20 days difference until harvest can make a big difference in boosting you until the rest of things come into production! Well, okay, I admit it, I’m just impatient. 😊
Carrots are one of the most versatile vegetables I grow in my garden. We plant them once a month through spring, and again after Labor Day. Except during summer’s intense heat, I harvest a continuous supply for salads or for cooking.

Since carrots will germinate in 45°F soil, I get an early start on my garden by sowing a short row of them in January, about 10 weeks before my last spring frost. I can expect harvest to begin in March. Small, crisp carrots fresh from the garden are a welcome addition to a spring salad!

Because feeder roots of carrots may plunge two feet below the surface, we begin by thoroughly working the soil. Before the year ends, we spread compost over the area, and dig it in. A few days before we intend to plant, we rotary till the rows again to loosen and mix the soil. Though I prepare my garden with organic materials such as rotted bedding from the goat stalls, or well-aged litter from the henhouse, I could use a 10-20-10 fertilizer at a rate of two ounces per ten feet of row. A higher nitrogen formula could result in much foliage and stunted, misshaped roots.

Pictures accompanying this article show the half-long variety, which I usually grow. In heavy soil like mine, with a high clay content, long carrot varieties don’t develop well. One suggestion: plant long carrots after early spring peas, because the peas’ strong root system opens the soil to a depth that allows long carrots to penetrate. On the other end of the spectrum, the very short or ball types such as Atlas (Parks Seeds) or Parisian (VT Bean Seed) will grow in shallow soil, or even in containers.

To add color to the carrot patch, I could grow Atomic Red. Purple Dragon might add some excitement to the garden.

Burpee offers a Kaleidoscope mix, which includes red, purple, yellow, and light green carrots. Carrot seeds are very small, and the sprouts are delicate and
hard to see. To mark the rows, I first plant a few radish seeds in the shallow furrow, then plant the carrot seeds and cover with barely a quarter inch of soil. I then spread coarse mulch thinly over the row to hold moisture and prevent crusting of the surface. Within a week, I see the radishes! Pairs of small, round leaves scattered along the row. At least another week will pass before the delicate fringe of carrot foliage becomes visible. Soon after the carrots appear, radishes start to form roots and I can remove some of them, carefully, to use in salads. Radishes mature in just three weeks, leaving the space for the carrots.

I try to hand weed and thin the carrots from the time I can see the foliage. Since they are so delicate, weeds can quickly outgrow and smother them. Since seeds are so tiny, it is difficult to sow thinly enough to avoid discarding any by thinning. The first threadlike roots are good for nothing, but I often use the tops. They have a slightly peppery flavor and anything green is welcome in my early spring salad. Tops can also be snipped and tossed into soup. As the carrots begin to develop, I use the whole plant in salad or add it to vegetable soup. At this point, I aim to create a half-inch spacing of the carrots. As roots develop, I pull every other one as I need them, thus increasing the space for those that remain. When I pull a few carrots and find them mature, if we need that space for another we grab the spading fork. Working a few inches away from the row, Don loosens the dirt so I can easily pull the carrots. Planting short rows of carrots monthly, January through May, we have a steady supply and usually store them in the refrigerator. The few times I have an over-abundance of carrots, I prefer to can them the old-fashioned way. I wash, scrape, and slice them, then boil until they are soft enough to pack tightly into glass jars. I add water, and a quarter teaspoon of salt to each pint, place lids and rings, and process them for 30 minutes at 10 pounds of pressure.

Years ago, when I used a water bath canner, I processed carrots for two hours. If I have only a few extra carrots, I may freeze them. I find they are better after I cook them till tender, then cool and pack into freezer containers. I sometimes freeze carrots with mixed vegetables. These are handy during a rainy winter day when I want to make soup or pot roast. Carrots are one of the most versatile vegetables I grow! They are also one of the least predictable. That is one reason I plant a short row every month. Vagaries of weather: Too much rain, or not enough; too much cold, or too much heat. All can affect the growth of carrots. One hungry rabbit can gobble up a whole row of carrots in one night.

We all know that when we plant a seed, we gamble on the outcome. To borrow an idea from an old country song: you gotta know when to plant ‘em; you gotta know how to tend, you gotta know when to accept your losses and hope for better luck in the next round! So if your carrots (or whatever else you planted) meet with adversity, prepare another furrow, and make another planting. Next month, the weather may cooperate and the rabbit may stay away, and the seeds will produce a bumper crop! It happens to me every year.
Six Steps To Starting And Saving Heirloom Tomatoes

BY MELISA MINK, HOMESTEAD MOMA
MISSISSIPPI

If the first tomato of the year is something you long after, this is for you. Growing and saving your heirloom tomato seed is something that will benefit your pocket book as well as your belly. And just think about the looks you’ll get at the local farmers market when you show up with striped green or orange tomatoes! They really are fun to grow, and they are nutritious too. Each year, we grow hundreds of our own plants by seed, save tons of money, add to our diet and wow our friends and neighbors.

STEP 1: GET YOUR SEEDS
To start your own collection, begin simply by saving the seed from the choicest tomatoes you can find or grow. If you want to try some new ones you don’t have access to, take a look at some of the heirloom catalogs and browse online. You will need to get your seeds ordered in January. This not only helps with the winter blues, but allows you time to grow your plants from seeds.

STEP 2: PLANT SEEDS
You will need to start the seeds in February or March. All you’ll need is your seed, seedling tray pots, a grow light and some old recycled cups. Get those colorful and crazy seeds into your wetted seed tray pots, place a plastic cover over them and place on top of the fridge for warmth. (Be sure to label them if planting several varieties.) The warmth of the refrigerator will help the trays stay warm and bring your little seedlings to life. You’ll have baby plants within a week, two at the most. This way of starting seed also works for peppers.

STEP 3: GROW SEEDLINGS
Next, move the trays of seedlings under a grow light. It needs to be close to the seedlings—within 10 inches, or they’ll become spindly. You’ll need to check and make sure they get water. Under the light, they can get dried out and die. You also should make sure they are not too wet or they will rot at the soil line. This is called dampening off, and it’s not good. You want them to stay damp, not wet, or too dry.
Heirloom tomatoes can handle temperatures as low as 40°F, but no frost whatsoever.

STEP 4: TRANSPLANTING

Next, transplant them into recycled Styrofoam cups after the second set of leaves begin to grow. These are the “true leaves.” If they begin to look leggy or grow too long reaching for the light, just plant deeper into the pot or cup. The plant will grow roots along that stem. The deep planting is good, as there will be more roots to soak up nutrients. I recycle disposable cups and use a nourishing potting soil for this step. Buying pots can get expensive.

STEP 5: GROW AND MAINTAIN

You will then be watching and watering for a few weeks. Once the stems look a little more green than white, and warm days permit, start setting outside for two hours at a time. This will “harden off” the plants to real outside weather. Also, keep an insecticidal soap spray on hand for gnats or aphids. Once you’ve done this on and off for a week or so, it’s time to find a warm, sunny place or greenhouse to leave them in more often. You can build a makeshift one with an old glass door, or use a cold frame. If it’s too sunny though, they could cook. Just make sure it’s ventilated well and the glass is not too close to the plants. They will also need to be kept frost-free at night. When early spring temperatures still get pretty low, just bring them back inside. They can handle temperatures as low as 40°F, but no frost whatsoever. You’ll know it’s chilly for them if the stem is a little purple.

STEP 6: HARVEST

Once summer is upon us, you’ll have your own hand-picked varieties no one else has. From purple to orange, green or white, it can be a tomato show of color. And once you’ve picked them and are enjoying the harvest, don’t forget to save your seeds. Just place your best-looking fruit’s seeds into a bowl or cup of water. It will need to sit for three or four days and grow mold. Yep, those funky bacteria will do you good deeds. It’s breaking down the gel sack around the seed and allowing it to be in a usable condition. Once the three days are up, scoop off the mold and wash the seeds in a screen-style strainer with cold water. Then place on a labeled paper towel to dry and voila! Now label a plastic freezer bag and place in freezer, and share a few with friends and family. You’re ready for the next season!
Anyone For Okra?

By Anita B. Stone

I remember moving from Ohio to North Carolina with my family several years ago, during which time I was looking forward to that southern home cooking everyone talked about. My neighbor qualified the staple of southern cooking when she asked if I had ever eaten okra. Being an avid gardener, I was ashamed to admit that I had never heard of okra. “What?” she hesitated. “Without okra we would starve. We just love the stuff.” She offered to cook a pot of stewed okra and one week later I decided that my desire for southern cooking was not exactly at the top of my can’t-wait-to-eat list. “It’s slimy,” I thought. Not wanting to hurt her feelings I told the neighbor how my family enjoyed okra’s unique taste. Two days later she visited us with a plate of southern fried okra. “I could tell by your facial expression that you weren’t pleased with okra stew,” she said. “Please try a small bite of fried okra.” From that day forward I have not only cooked fried okra on a weekly basis, but I have acquired a taste for the stuff in soups, stews and casseroles, so long as I “doctored” it up.

Okra is actually a very versatile fresh, crisp vegetable that has gotten a mixed reputation. And, yet, this fast grower is one of the most heat and drought tolerant vegetable species in the world and will tolerate clay soils. Okra’s hall of fame is its magnificent yellow and purple hibiscus-like flowers. As a member of the mallow family, the showy bloom attracts natural pollinators. Its sometimes debatable taste and popular food source reigns supreme in southern gardens and has become a staple of many regional cuisines. So, if you are an okra enthusiast, you are among thousands of foodies whose diet consists of this 10-calorie productive crop plus receive the benefits of vitamins A, C and K. A good source of fiber, calcium and potassium, okra is also known for being high in antioxidants.

In my home garden as well as the recently constructed community garden I partnered with at Eastern Wake Technical Community College, we planted okra seeds in a small 4’ by 6’ raised bed garden. Although we got a late start, within a six-day period we were amazed at the speedy growth of this vegetable, which far surpassed other crops. We planted two seeds at a time, ¾” deep and spaced every 3” to 4” per spot, in full sun and organic soil, and then offered daily doses of water to establish a healthy root system. Okra does require acidic soil with a pH between 5.5 and 6.5 for the average stalk to grow between four and six-feet tall. In less than seven days, we thinned to one plant every 10–12 inches apart for airflow. We grew each stalk between three and five feet apart in linear rows. Because the seed pods become fibrous and woody, the fruits are harvested when immature and should be eaten before they grow too long.

Surprisingly, we did not have to weed the bed, nor did we offer the crop a boost of fertilizer five to six weeks after planting. But I did not follow protocol with one of the easiest plants to grow. Knowing the most common diseases afflicting the okra plant is verticillium wilt, powdery mildew leaf spots and root-knot nematodes, I watched the plant on a daily basis, using no side dressings as fertilizer. I decided my okra was going to be organic, so there was no pesticide, herbicide or fungicide used. I also broke the rule of thumb and did not surround the plants with mulch because I assumed that an excess amount of nitrogen would lead to increased leaf growth and lower pod yields. So, I simply permitted the seeds to germi-
nate, thinned them out and released the freedom to grow. And they did—extremely well and pest-free. Like a mysterious hand reaching out each night, the okra seemed to grow quickly. I made certain the pods were approximately two-to-four inches long because that length made them easy and tasty when cooked, rather than wait until the pods reached a six-inch length where they became tough and fibrous. Several pounds of the crop became available every other day, which we donated to nearby charities. After all, that’s the meaning of community garden—to provide for the community. I also made sure to remove any old pods during harvest to encourage new growth.

One of my favorite okra plants is the heirloom “Clemson Spineless,” a popular source of food for warm climate gardens and a reliably high yielding plant which grows, but does not become too fibrous. Another heirloom, “Annie Oakley,” is a quick growing dwarf that matures in 48 to 52 days and has spineless pods, grows to about five-feet tall in more temperate summer climates rather than in balmy southern gardens. Next year I am going to try heirloom “Burgundy,” which grows colorful crimson pods, stalks and leaves, and appears less slimy than the other varieties. An interesting heirloom named for its large rounded pods that resembles bovine horns is “Cow Horn,” which dates back to the Civil War. The pods are spineless and tender once they grow to three inches in length, and are great for stewing and soups.

If you are not a fan of okra, chances are you really haven’t tried it in a way that excites your palate. Preparation of okra can be simple. Once rolled in bread crumbs and fried, the taste becomes more like a fried zucchini or breaded squash. Chefs and cooks stew okra with onion and tomatoes with small bits of meat and corn. Some roast the vegetable with margarine. Serve it over rice, hot cornbread or grits, or even add it to ratatouille and you have a family meal.

“It’s something we grew up with,” says southern gardener Karson Turner. “If you cook it right, you can enjoy the taste whether you bread it or add garlic. It’s one of those traditional foods.” Karson went on to say, “Nowadays, anything goes. Several country clubs are serving okra as an elite entrée.

Whoever would have thought our little pods would become famous?” she chuckled.

I have often been asked where okra originated. The answer comes as a surprise. There is no defined geographical origin of okra. Related to cotton and other mallow family plants, it is an ancient vegetable that originated in Ethiopia. Spreading across Western Africa, it became a staple cuisine for a long time and even crossed the ocean to Asia where it then spread to India and continues to be popular in Indian and Pakistani cuisine. Eventually it made its appearance in Brazil, the West Indies and reached North America in the early 18th century. The crop grew...
Because the seed pods become fibrous and woody, the fruits are harvested when immature and should be eaten before they grow too long.

as far north as Philadelphia and was well established in Virginia. Toward the end of the 19th century okra became popular in Japanese cuisine, served with soy sauce or as tempura. The name okra is recognized in the United States and is frequently known as “lady’s fingers” outside of Africa. With a lineage of names from Western Africa to Nigeria, we get the word “gumbo” from the island of Macau and the English name “okra.” Highly recognized, gumbo has become the most popular regional “signature” dish found throughout the Gulf Coast and is especially popular as a stew.

Currently Mediterranean cuisine is noted for a thick stew made from okra. Pods may be pickled or deep fried. Farmers in Nigeria have developed a multi-crop system which uses a variety of vegetables, including okra. In the Caribbean, okra is eaten in a variety of soups. In the Dominican Republic it is eaten along with rice and in Haiti, it is cooked with rice and maize. Because the entire plant is edible, the leaves are also eaten raw in salads or cooked in the same way as the greens of beets.

Okra grows in raised beds in the community garden. The pod seeds may be roasted, pickled or ground, and sometimes used as a caffeine-free substitute for coffee. In 2009 a study revealed the potential of okra oil used as a biofuel.

Planting okra can begin with seeds indoors in peat pots three to four weeks before the last spring frost. You can also start okra directly in garden soil during the heat of July. The seeds or seedlings require fertile soil and full sun. As with beans, you can soak okra seeds overnight to help speed germination. Be sure to space the plants up to two feet apart.

If you select mulch, apply approximately six inches around the plant and if you wish to side-dress, you can use aged manure or compost. About two months after planting, the okra will be ready for harvest. It is best to pick when it is between two to three inches long and harvest frequently. Tiny spines may irritate your skin, so unless you have a spineless variety, make sure you wear gloves to protect your skin. Okra is easily stored. Simply place the uncut and uncooked pods into freezer bags and keep them in the freezer. You can also bread small slices and place them in freezer bags for the winter months. Or you can parch the seeds to make a fake version of coffee just as occurred during the Civil War. At the end of the harvest I make certain to select a few young pods and dry them during the winter months, storing them in a cool, dry location. When spring arrives I open the pods and several viable seeds are ready to be planted. Once you plant okra in the garden, you will never have to spend one cent in new purchases, unless you decide to try another variety.

Whether you live in the Gulf Coast region, North Carolina, Maryland, New York or Michigan, you can grow okra. It is fast becoming an eye-catching crop, not only for its ease in growth and productivity, but for its sustainability. Even during the summer months in cold states okra likes to be the “star” of the garden and may grow successfully given the right conditions. It chooses its companions carefully. It does not tolerate tomatoes, but will grow well near peppers, basil and eggplant. With increasing popularity this vegetable has proven to be a winner from farm to fork as a major food source and continues to offer ease for farmer, gardener, and homesteader.
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KOHLRABI

I Grow An Oddball

Kohlrabi: neither turnip nor cabbage—an oddball vegetable.

By Nancy Pierson Farris
South Carolina

Kohlrabi: the oddball among vegetables I grow in spring. The word means turnip-cabbage. Like a turnip, kohlrabi produces an edible bulb. Unlike a turnip, kohlrabi bulbs grow above ground. Like cabbage, kohlrabi leaves attract cabbage butterflies; unlike cabbage, kohlrabi leaves grow, not from a root, but from a bulb.

Like other cole crops, kohlrabi grows best in cool weather; early spring or in the fall. In a normal year, I can grow kohlrabi in the garden about a month before Easter. (Usually our last cold snap occurs Easter week.)

This year, due to unpredictable winter weather, I started a few kohlrabi, along with other coles, in a flat in my cool greenhouse.

I use flats which my husband, Don, built. For the sides, he used 1 x 4s and the bottoms are counter-top material left over from a kitchen remodel. Don used a quarter-inch drill bit to make drainage holes at five-inch intervals in the bottom of each flat.

I begin by spreading two inches of good potting soil in each flat, then I add an inch of sterile soil or vermiculite. Thus, I sow seeds in a sterile medium, and if unsettled weather forces me to leave seedlings in the flat for an extra week or two, the potting soil underneath provides nutrients and support for the developing root systems.

About eight weeks before the last spring frost, I sow seeds—thinly so seedlings won’t get crowded as they grow—and cover lightly with sterile medium. I lay a piece of glass over the top or wrap the flat in plastic, to conserve moisture.

When seeds sprout (about a week to 10 days), I remove the cover and set the flat under a shop light in the greenhouse. I use one white and one regular tube (white is cooler, but costlier). I adjust the chains holding the light fixture so that plants are growing at two-inch spacing. Then, I lay a soaker hose along the row and water for a few minutes to settle the soil around the roots. Thereafter, I water for a few minutes each day to keep soil moist.

About a week later, Don prepares another 10 feet of row. Since our soil tends toward acidity, I check with my trusty pH meter. If it reads below 5, we add a bit of dolomitic lime or wood ash to the compost we place in the furrow. We cover that with a couple of inches of soil, then sow the kohlrabi seeds, and cover lightly. We keep the soil moist until seeds sprout, about a week to 10 days later. This year, I interplanted nasturtiums with cole crops—this tasty, edible flower may repel cabbage butterflies.

Don sprays all cole crops weekly with bacillus thurengiensis to reduce cabbage butterfly populations.

I have grown the White Vienna, which produces three-inch bulbs in about six weeks. This year, I started with Express Forcer (Parks Seeds), which matures in just over five weeks, and tolerates frost well. I started kohlrabi in flats during the winter storms of February and began harvesting small bulbs in late March. For a continued harvest, I planted Purple Vienna and Kongo Hybrid, (both from Shumway Seeds). The former has purple skin and the Kongo will make bulbs up to six inches across. Both varieties require 60 days to full maturity. Sown in March, these produced through May and June.

By July, cole crops are becoming tough and bitter, and the cabbage butterflies are making plans for a summer festival in my garden. It is time to harvest kohlrabi and clear the row for okra or black-eyed peas.

Kohlrabi has a flavor like a mild turnip with just a hint of apple. Small bulbs need no peeling and can be sliced to add a nice crunch to spring salads. I add slices or wedges of larger bulbs to salads or vegetable trays. I also shred the larger bulbs into coleslaw or carrot-apple salad.

Since stems are fragile, I handle seedlings by leaves or roots, and set plants at two-inch spacing. Then, I lay a soaker hose along the row and water for a few minutes. Thus, I sow seeds in a sterile medium, and if unsettled weather forces me to leave seedlings in the flat for an extra week or two, the potting soil underneath provides nutrients and support for the developing root systems.

About three weeks after I sow the flat, I make a stir-fry using sliced kohlrabi and added to a skillet in which I have gently cooked onions in a bit of olive oil. I have grown the White Vienna, which produces three-inch bulbs in about six weeks. This year, I started with Express Forcer (Parks Seeds), which matures in just over five weeks, and tolerates frost well. I started kohlrabi in flats during the winter storms of February and began harvesting small bulbs in late March. For a continued harvest, I planted Purple Vienna and Kongo Hybrid, (both from Shumway Seeds). The former has purple skin and the Kongo will make bulbs up to six inches across. Both varieties require 60 days to full maturity. Sown in March, these produced through May and June.

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I make a stir-fry using sliced kohlrabi added to a skillet in which I have gently cooked onions in a bit of olive oil.

Kohlrabi is neither turnip nor cabbage—it looks like an oddball and has a unique flavor. I enjoy growing it, not only for the taste it adds to spring salads, but for the conversation piece it can become when neighbors see it in my garden!
Farmers with 1,500 acres available and urban backyard gardeners alike often have the same complaint: “If I only had just a little more space somewhere, I could grow...” There often seems to be a need to produce just a little more, to grow an additional fruit or vegetable that would be great to have, but doesn’t seem to have any place to call home.

Unless a farmer or gardener wants to chop down all their shade trees and dig up the front lawn, all available crop space is in use. Yet there still is a need to grow a little bit more—but how? In fact, there are two ways. Two potential techniques for increasing acreage are not only easy to employ, but lead to property beautification while doing them.

Such two space-expanding, prettiness-enhancing tricks might be called planting climbers and crawlers. The former involves plants that like to go up, often in places where fruits and vegetables aren’t usually found. The latter finds ground-hugging plants adapted to narrow environments usually thought of as inappropriate for farming or gardening.

Let’s examine climbers first.

**By Glenn G. Dahlem, Ph. D.**
Climbers

Some plants just like to climb. An annual example is green pole beans; two perennial ones are Clinton grapes and strangler figs. Moreover, some trees don’t seem to mind being climbed upon, especially in their lower trunk area. One example is the American black walnut tree. A valuable commercial crop in its own right, yielding valuable meats, shells, husks and furniture-grade lumber, black walnut trees have widely spaced branches, leaving ample trunk space for climbers. But be careful about what you plant near walnut trees. Do your research first, as a lot won’t grow well with walnut trees nearby.

Sometimes climbers don’t need trees at all. Almost every farm and many urban properties have one or two less than attractive building sides, fences or other manmade structures. Use of cord, running from pegs in the ground to those building eves will give pole beans all the grip they need as they shoot skyward. As long as ample sunlight and occasional watering is available, pole beans will thrive. Most fences won’t even need any cord to help the beans or other climbers along. Here is where the beautification aspect comes into play. Bunches of dark green beans, hanging down in large numbers, will obscure a shed or garage wall or chain link, rail or wire strand fence. Granted, this will only take place a month or so during a growing season, but short-lived beauty is beauty never the less.

Clinton grapes are an agricultural curiosity like none other. A hybrid between two wild American species and dark blue European domestic grapes, they were developed by a New York state college professor early in the 19th century. Somewhat strong-tasting for table grapes, their very dark, elliptical-shaped fruit makes excellent wine for serving with wild game, mutton and sausage. Little known in the United States, Clinton grape wine is popular in Switzerland, Austria and Northern Italy.

Due to their wild grape ancestry, Clinton grapes are avid climbers. One vine made it up 100 feet on a huge blue spruce tree without any human assistance, where for many years it helped feed generations of songbirds. With minimal care, Clinton grape vines can yield under more manageable conditions. Just as the dangling pole beans contributed to an attractive environment before being harvested, hanging clusters of grapes will do so too.

Obviously, it’s easier to use annual climbers like pole beans than a perennial one like Clinton grapes. When Clinton grapes start their skyward journey, they plan to stay wherever it takes them! For example, if pole beans run along an unused clothesline, it’s easy to remove the dead vines once the growing season ends. Not so for perennial vines like Clinton grapes. Wherever they grab a hold, they intend to remain.

Another perennial climber, strangler figs, requires special knowledge, as do figs in general. Just as their name implies, stranglers will damage or kill most live hosts upon which they intertwine.

There are four families of fig species. One doesn’t bear fruit. Another bears fruit but presents complicated pollination issues. A third readily produces, but takes the form of a conventional tree, rather than a climber. Then there are the numerous varieties of stranglers.

The best rule of thumb for dealing with strangler figs is, except for one species named clusia, which rarely kills its host but requires an almost tropical environment, don’t let them climb a valued tree. A good host for stranglers is a large dead or dying trunk of a tree that would have otherwise presented major removal problems. Strangler figs are not a parasite; parasites require a live host, off of which they live. Stranglers will envelop a living tree, but continue to flourish after they eventually kill it. They also thrive attached to non-woody hosts, such as concrete or brick walls, drawing nourishment from the soil like any other vine. As they slowly build upon such a foundation, they continually yield fruit, while creating an attractive, permanent living wall or barrier.
While climbers go up, crawlers expand along the ground, covering up unproductive or unsightly patches of soil. They also include annuals and perennials, and offer dual benefits of food production and beautification. One of the top crawlers is zucchini squash. It adapts well to almost any environment, and is a prolific producer of a universally appealing food commodity. Its large dark green leaves and numerous big, orange-yellow flowers make it one of the prettiest garden vegetables.

A favorite zucchini site is a roadside ditch, or narrow strip of sod along a driveway. As long as some sun and occasional water is available, zucchini will feel at home, even if it is planted in a row, not in hills, as squashes normally are. As they rapidly grow, zucchini are self-weeding, as their thick broad leaves shut out the sun from any upstart weeds. As long as a little dirt is available, they don’t seem to mind sharing it with a few rocks and stones. Zucchini will continue to bear throughout a summer if their fruit is kept picked, harvesting it when it reaches a foot to 15 inches long.

Two good perennial crawlers are asparagus and rhubarb. There is a bit more work initially connected with asparagus than most other perennial vegetables, as the original rootstock may need to be buried in a prescribed manner at a depth of up to four feet. The stock is very long-lived. One bed planted in the early years of the 20th century was producing into the 1950s, without cultivation or fertilization.

The beautification aspect of asparagus occurs after it bears edible shoots for about a month in the spring. It goes to seed, producing tall, dark green ferns with bright red berries. These berries attract songbirds, and a row of dark green ferns can form an attractive, albeit temporary, property or garden border designation. Some gardeners blessed only with minimal available space have planted asparagus in a flower garden, achieving an interesting esthetic effect.

Rhubarb, unlike zucchini, doesn’t thrive if planted in a ditch, but it does do well alongside a house, fence or garage, just so some sun is available. As long as moderate water and a little fertilizer are provided, a row of rhubarb hills will continue to bear its edible stems throughout an entire growing season. Rhubarb’s large green leaves and pretty rose-colored stems make it one of the most naturally attractive garden plants. (Ed. note: Just remember the leaves are poisonous, so don’t feed them to livestock.)

There is one family of vegetables, native to India, but popular with some farmers and gardeners in both Europe and North America, that can be climbers or crawlers. That is, they may be trained up a lattice or fence, like grapes, or allowed to spread out on the ground, like pumpkins. These are the so-called bottle gourds, known as Doodhi or Lowki in their native India. This group of subspecies, from a culinary standpoint, may be prepared for eating either like a summer squash, such as zucchini, or winter squash, such as Hubbard.

Although bottle gourds will never climb to great heights, like pole beans, nor spread out willy-nilly on their own, like zucchini, they do present a considerable degree of versatility to farmers and gardeners. They also lend themselves to a wider range of consumption options than do more highly specialized plants like Clinton grapes or rhubarb.

So the next time some agriculturalist dares to say, “If I only had the room....”

You can tell him or her, “Climbers and crawlers say that you do.”

Rhubarb does well alongside a house, fence or garage, as long as some sun is available.
Cauliflower can serve as the focal point for a centerpiece or it can serve as a low calorie, low carbohydrate substitute for mashed potatoes. I enjoy it raw in my lunch salad, or steamed with a bit of butter or a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese. The edible portion of cauliflower is fully exposed to any chemical used to control cabbage worms or other invading pests. By growing my own, I control what is sprayed on the plant.

Cauliflower will grow in spring or fall — succession planting in either season will provide fresh heads for several weeks. The best curd forms during cool weather, though if young plants are exposed to extreme cold, the plant will form buttons rather than large, succulent heads. When exposed to high temperatures, the plant will form small, bitter, discolored heads. In my area of South Carolina, summer heat brings a quick end to spring cauliflower. When summer abates, however, I can grow lovely cauliflower during the fall months. In other areas, springtime allows for planting, although harvest must be done by the peak summer heat.
For my fall plantings, I start cole crops on a screened porch, protected from insects and hot summer sun. I pot up cauliflower seedlings into four-inch pots. I have fluorescent lights hung a few inches above the plants, and I feed them weekly with fish emulsion.

I put cabbage and broccoli plants into the garden about six to eight weeks after sowing the flats. I have had best results with cauliflower if I wait until seedlings are about 12 weeks old.

I set my fall cole crops into space that has already borne a spring crop. Since cauliflower requires a lot of nitrogen, I like to place them into a row that has been vacated by a legume, which has fixed nitrogen in the soil. After tilling the area, I spread compost into a furrow, cover it with two inches of soil, then set the young plants about 18 to 20 inches apart.

The large leaves of cauliflower transpire copiously, so plants require a steady supply of moisture. The USDA recommends an inch to an inch and a half of water per week.

Initially, all cole crops look alike. I label flats and pots, but sometimes a seed has floated over to settle with a cousin. Or a seedling gets into the wrong pot. What I thought was a cauliflower may form a cabbage head near the ground, rather than growing large leaves. Or a green curd forms in that nest of leaves, identifying the plant as a broccoli.

I grow self-blanching cauliflower, which makes a floret of leaves to protect the curd from sunlight. I gently open that floret to find a tiny white curd. Then I know I have cauliflower.

All cole crops attract cabbage moths, which lay eggs on the underside of leaves. I check my plants in early morning, crush any masses of yellow eggs, and pick off any green worms I see. I use Bacillus thurengiensis as a control. It is toxic only to worms. It is available in either dust or liquid. Clemson agents recommend using the spray, because dust can cling to bees, those faithful pollinators in the garden.

I start harvesting as soon as curds are a few inches across, and continue cutting them as needed. Unlike broccoli, cauliflower does not make side shoots, so after harvesting a head, I pull the plant and toss it into the goat pen. The leaves are edible, but we prefer collards for our greens.

If cauliflower curd begins to separate or turn yellow, I harvest them immediately. They will keep in the refrigerator for a couple of weeks. If I have many, I cook them briefly and pack into containers for the freezer.

If grown in fall, cauliflower withstands light frost. When night temperatures drop below 30°F, I cover each plant with a basket.
Have Eggplant Your Way

By Nancy Pierson Farris
South Carolina

How do you like your eggplant? When I started growing this vegetable, the standard Black Beauty produced dark purple, oval fruits. Since then, growers have developed shapes varying from round to long and slender, and a range of colors including white, lavender, and purple streaked.

Varieties I have grown include Whopper (Park’s), Black Bell (Vermont Bean Seed) and Burpee Hybrid. My favorite is Purple Rain (Burpee), which is purple streaked with white. This one matures in 66 days and has a mild flavor and small, tender seeds.

This year, I am trying Ping Tung Long (Shumway), which is small and slender. It should work well when I want to slice it lengthwise or make strips to add to a noodle casserole or a stir-fry dish.

I start my plants in mid-February, six weeks before my last expected frost date. I use homemade flats, which are four inches deep. Into this, I place two inches of good soil, then add an inch of sterile soil. I mark rows in the soil, dribble water into the furrow, then place the seeds so plants won’t overlap as they grow. I cover the seeds with sterile soil, water the whole flat well, then wrap the flat with plastic to keep soil moist and protect emerging seedlings. After sprouts appear, I remove the plastic and water regularly so soil surface does not dry out.

When the seedlings have strong second leaves, I pot them into 12 ounce Styrofoam cups. Formerly, I mixed my own potting soil, but now I usually purchase a good potting soil for this. While moving young seedlings, I handle them with care by the leaves or roots because stems are fragile and easily broken. I put a little soil into each cup, then gently set a plant in and fill with potting soil. I set these cups into a vacated flat and place them under fluorescent lights. As seedlings grow, I adjust the light fixtures to keep them about two inches above the plants. I feed weekly with a fish emulsion solution.

Since eggplants are not cold tolerant, I hold them in my cool greenhouse until frost danger has passed. As weather warms, we open the greenhouse during the day and if night temperatures drop below 45 degrees, we close the window and door overnight.

When I am ready to move the eggplants to the garden, I choose a spot that will receive several hours of sunlight daily. I dig holes about one and a half feet apart, put in a shovelful of compost and a half-shovelful of soil. I pour about a pint of water into the hole, then set the plant and cover with dry soil.

To guard against cutworms, I place something alongside the stem so the worm cannot wrap itself around the stem to cut it off. The most effective thing I have found is a piece of dried basil stem. Toothpicks or other twigs will work, but the odor of basil seems to repel the worms. Since I always leave some basil to go to seed for the birds, I have plenty of stems.

Eggplants need to grow quickly and attain robust size before fruit set begins. The USDA recommends side-dressing

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with 5-10-5 fertilizer to encourage bloom and fruiting. Since I find water soluble fertilizers most convenient, I create a shallow moat around each plant and fill it with water into which I have placed fish emulsion and compost. I apply this every other week till blooms appear.

If rains don’t come, we irrigate at least once a week to keep soil from drying out. Since eggplants are subject to fungal disease or powdery mildew, I avoid watering in a way that would cause water to remain on the leaves, especially overnight. Sometimes I do the job by hand, pouring water around the base of each plant. Or, we lay a soaker hose along the row to get water to the roots.

In Low Country South Carolina, our well water comes up through limestone. In times of drought when we must irrigate frequently, I check soil pH and if the reading goes above 6.8, I take steps to reduce alkalinity. Organic matter helps to control pH. We are surrounded by pine trees, and I often rake back the top layer of pine needles to get to partially rotted material underneath. Used as a mulch, that adds acidity to the soil.

Eggplants do have a few enemies. Flea beetles eat tiny holes in the leaves. Catnip helps repel flea beetles. Healthy plants can withstand some damage without reduction to the crop. Only if infestation is severe do we dust or spray with poison that might hurt beneficial insects.

Occasionally, eggplants may succumb to wilt or blight. Resistant varieties are the best prevention. We rotate all garden crops on a three-year plan so that soil borne diseases are less likely to reproduce and attack the crop in subsequent years.

Eggplants produce an attractive bloom, then set fruit. For best texture and flavor, pick eggplants while skin is still shiny. When it dulls, seeds quickly harden and may become bitter. The flesh may develop a pithy texture.

Our grandmothers prepared eggplant by breading and frying the slices. We are smarter now about fat and carbohydrates. Eggplant slices can be broiled, grilled, or baked. Diced eggplant adds bulk and fiber to almost any casserole. Eggplant layered with sweet onion slices and baked, makes a good side dish. Since eggplant has a mild taste, it absorbs the flavor of whatever combination of seasonings I use—Italian, Mexican, or Eastern. I add strips of eggplant to my chicken curry.

For my favorite eggplant casserole, I sauté slices of eggplant and layer them with onion, garlic, and tomato sauce. When the casserole reaches “hot, bubbly, and fork-tender”, I sprinkle on grated cheese and put the dish back into the oven just till the cheese melts.

Some health experts say that purple foods are good for the brain. Red foods contain lycopene, which may help prevent some cancers, and garlic may lower cholesterol. With my “senior moments” becoming more frequent, I figure I need all the brain food I can get and if I can smother it in something that prevents disease, I like it that much better!

Grow some eggplant this year, and prepare it any way you like it.
Water Rings
Make Watering a Snap

By Philip Neal
Mississippi

Getting water right to a plant’s root zone can sometimes be frustrating, with lots of “runoff” water being wasted. Solve the problem by turning those old plastic nursery pots into convenient “water rings.” Simply cut off the top four or five inches, creating a “ring” open at both ends. Place the ring around a young seedling, working it into the ground about an inch. Fill it to the rim and watch the water slowly soak right into the root zone—with no runoff. Repeat as needed. Works great with liquid fertilizers, too. Experiment with different size rings for bigger plants.

Water rings keep water in the root zone. A small flag can be useful to help locate the “water ring” under a sprawling plant such as this cucumber.
No matter what climate you live in, cultivating beets is the perfect crop for anyone to grow. Not only are they tolerant of cool temperatures, but they are one of the best and easiest vegetables to grow, offering a sweet taste and nutritional punch. As a matter of fact, they are one of the few vegetables that enable you to eat the whole plant. For gardeners they can be an extremely lucrative cash crop.

And, yet, so many of us do not grow or eat beets. The Federal Government doesn’t even track how many beets are grown and sold in a given year. “I think they’re making their comeback,” says Tammy Woodall, spokesperson for Goldsboro’s Cox Farms, which offers roots almost year round and the full beet in spring and summer.
“Beets are a good source of phytonutrients, vitamin C, potassium, manganese and fibers,” says health coach Sara Hamm. Juicing has become popular these days with many types of fruits and vegetables. “You can make a drink of kale, apple, cucumber and ginger. The leafy greens on any vegetable, including beets, are fantastic, more iron than spinach,” she adds. “And you can sauté them in olive oil.” You can also boil beets in soups. For canning and pickling as a side dish, use a tender sweet beet and simply add them to salads, combined with feta cheese and pine nuts. Some people microwave beet greens for about 10 minutes or boil them until they become tender. Many growers like to freeze the vegetable for future use.

Historically, a little known fact is that the beet was one of the first European crops brought over to cultivate by George Washington in the 1700s. Most gardeners are familiar with Thomas Jefferson’s magnitude of crops, but Washington was also a noted farmer who grew many crops, the beet being an experimental one in his garden at Mt. Vernon. According to a reliable source who worked at the Mt. Vernon gardens, the name given to what we currently call the beet, was “mangalwerzel,” also called the marigold or mangel beet, a cultivated root vegetable.

This low-cost, high-yield crop not only represents just plain red balls most of us visualize. Growers have developed unique root qualities and varieties to decorate our plates, which include red, yellow or white colors and different shapes. The red beets are the most common. Several cultivars include Little Ball, Detroit Dark Red or Early Wonder, which produces leafy beet tops also. Their flavor ranges from candy-sweet to almost bitter, depending on the type of beet and how long it has grown in the landscape. Burpee Golden beets and Albino White are sweet and mild cultivars. When growing golden beets, keep them moist, watering deeply and do not let the soil become dry. Keep the area free from weeds and use a seaweed-based fertilizer with a one-to-two-inch layer of mulch around the plants. Make sure the roots are at least one inch across when harvesting. Golden beets will store in the refrigerator for two weeks. The tops should be eaten shortly after harvest. You can grow golden beets in a fairly frost tolerant landscape and can be planted a month prior to the frost-free date in your area. Or you can start them indoors on their 55-day growing period. Most yellow or gold beets have a mild flavor. They are often used in cooked foods because their skin is thin and doesn’t require peeling. Sugar beets are grown for a different purpose. Instead of slicing the roots, growers turn the plant into table sugar, animal food and other products. Sugar beets are white, sweet and bigger than ordinary garden beets with roots that can grow six inches or more across.

Beet greens, which are located at the tops of the vegetable, are excellent in salads when they are young. Green Top Bunching beets are an excellent variety, and most growers prefer this type just for growing greens. When the plant becomes aged, the leaves or greens can be cooked. If you grow beets just for the greens, sow the seeds one-half inch apart and do not thin them. Beet green benefits give you vitamins C, A and E. Measurably one-half cup of cooked greens allows 30 percent of the recommended daily allowance of vitamin C.

Beets do prefer a cooler climate of between 60° to 65°F. Most types are tolerant of heat. The more sunny days we have, the more beet growth and development will occur in the garden. Beets make a great long season crop because they can handle cold weather, but not severe freezing.

Beets are a quick turnover crop. If you plant seeds in February and set into the garden in April, beets are

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If you prepare your seedbed in the spring, sow the seeds about a half-inch deep, spaced one inch apart, with one inch to one-and-a-half inches between rows. When they double their growth, thin them to about one plant every three inches.
ready for harvest in June. Beets can be left in the ground for quite a while yet before harvesting, but they’re at their most tender and tastiest when they’re almost two inches in diameter. By early June the seeds planted in the open ground in April have become four inch seedlings and are ready for thinning to two or three inch intervals. To plant, try putting a few seeds in loose, well-drained soils. Any debris will shorten growth time. If you have clay soil, organic matter should be added. So many of us are using raised beds and cropping and beets function at their best in less compacted soil and less foot traffic.

Since beets are sensitive to soil acidity, I generally start the plants in a large bucket or two, definitely out of harm’s way from falling pine needles, leaves, twigs, rocks and other debris. A low soil pH will stunt beet growth. They prefer a pH of 6.2 to 6.8 and will tolerate up to 7.5. Make sure that the fertilizer contains nitrogen and phosphorus, which can be mixed into the soil prior to planting. If you want to use fertilizer and lime, it is best to have the soil tested so that you can apply the best materials. Usually a 5-10-10 organic fertilizer can be applied at the time of planting and again when the plants are about three inches high. Or you can fertilize weekly with compost tea or seaweed as soon as the plants develop their true leaves and they are two to three inches tall.

If you prepare your seedbed in the spring, sow the seeds about a half-inch deep, spaced one inch apart, with one inch to one-and-a-half inches between rows. When they double their growth, thin them to about one plant every three inches. Eventually there would be about three to four inches between plants to avoid crowding. A frequent error is over planting and under thinning. Make sure the beet seeds are actually small fruits that each contain four to eight potential seedlings apiece, so don’t plant seeds too thickly together.

Succession planting can be done at three-week intervals. However, try not to seed during periods of high heat. Maturity will occur within 50 to 70 days. Plant the last set about 90 days before the first frost. So check your location for projected seasonal frost dates.

It’s a good idea to apply mulch once the plants are established. The mulch will prevent compaction and help keep weed growth to a minimum. Grass clippings make an excellent moisture magnet. Always cover the roots that might poke through the soil’s surface to prevent them from turning green and tough.

The insects that may attack beets are flea beetles, leaf miners, aphids, Cercospora leaf spot, scab and root rot. Every one of these can be avoided by not wetting the foliage or over-watering. A rule of thumb is to keep the plants thinned, which will provide air circulation. Check the growth of your crop regularly to maintain a healthy balance. If you spot any pest problems, call your local extension office for suggestions.

To harvest beets, the greens are best when they are about 6” tall. And the roots are tender after forty to fifty days. The best size beet is up to two inches in diameter. To prevent wilting, keep the beets cool and with high humidity such as in a root cellar or on the back side of a porch.

For an heirloom Italian beet, try Chioggia and Cylindra, which looks like a potato. Because beets are good root cellar plants, you can sow another crop in June for harvest in the fall. Sow two rows, four to six inches apart and sprinkle the seeds in at one-inch intervals. If the weather turns hot in June watch for the life of these seeds as they may bake in the heat, so watering is essential.

Harvesting leafy green tops is simply a matter of clipping a leaf or two from each bunch, leaving one to one and one-half inch of the stem attached to the root. If you prefer to harvest the whole beet, remove the greens from the root, leaving about an inch of stem on each root. If the greens are left on the root, you will wind up with a soft and bitter root. It is preferable to harvest greens just before you use them. If you decide to store them, rinse and dry the leaves and place them in a plastic bag or wrap them in a cloth and put them in the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator.

Because I grow several vegetables in containers, I suggest proper soil as a key factor. That requires quality potting soil. Beets can be planted in the spring or fall or both for a double crop. You will need a pot with a six-inch depth to grow beets. Fill the pot with potting soil mixed with organic matter. Beets like well draining soil. As in the ground, keep the pH between 6.5 and 7.

When you set out seeds, the outside temperature can be as low as 40 degrees for germination and as high as 90 degrees. Plant the seeds about 3/4-inch deep about one foot apart. You will see the seedlings pop up in about six days or if cooler weather prevails, it may take up to two weeks. Thin the seedlings when they reach four inches in height. You can even eat the seedlings if you get hungry. Make sure you cut the seedlings, rather than pull them out from the soil because you may damage the roots of other seedlings. And make sure you set the container in full sun. If you want to protect the beets from leaf miners, try placing a light netting or cheesecloth on top to protect them from the adult flies. Small or large, beets give us a wonderful dose of gardening and nutrition. You may find an incredible amount of interest in something as simple and as healthy as growing beets. Not only will they provide your family with an economically sufficient food source, but they can become part of the sustainability in the backyard or in the field, while enhancing an eco-friendly environment.
When sunny summer days arrive, I think summer squash. Summer squash are low in calories (15 per half cup) and they contain the phytochemical lutein, which is helpful for eyes. That interests me because I have battled glaucoma for 35 years.

To get the earliest squash in the neighborhood, I have tried various techniques. I have started plants in peat pots about four weeks before my last frost date. During the last week, roots are coming through the pots and the plants may need water two or three times daily. When I set them out, I place them into holes deep enough so I can cover the rims of the pots with soil. Otherwise, peat pots will wick moisture out of surrounding soil and plants will suffer from dehydration. I have found that plants not started this way suffer transplant shock and don’t start growing much for several days. Direct seeded hills sprout within a week and make fast, steady growth, often producing within a few days after the transplanted squash.

My favorite method is to create a mini greenhouse for early hills of squash. I save gallon jugs emptied of milk or vinegar. I wash the jugs and cut off the bottoms. Two weeks before my last frost date, I prepare the squash hills. I dig a hole about a foot deep and dump in about a pint of compost from my henhouse. I throw a shovelful of dirt over that, pour in about a pint of water, and sow four squash seeds. After covering with dry soil, I set the jug over the hill. As the chicken waste rots, the composting produces heat beneath the sprouting seeds. The jug collects solar heat. On warm, sunny days, I remove the jug because temperatures inside the mini greenhouse can get too high. I replace the jug in late afternoon to protect the hill from cool night temperatures.

Squash grown under the jugs will usually produce about 10 days before the seeds I plant after frost danger has passed. I prepare all squash hills the same way, using compost beneath each hill. I think my squash have a richer flavor than what my neighbor grows using only chemical fertilizers. I grow several varieties of zucchini; my favorite scallop squash is Sunburst. (Park, Burpee, Harris.) It has an attractive golden color with a splash of green at the stem end. I cut big slices for sautéing; or, cut it crossways and make strips to stir fry.

I grow many hills of my favorite stewing squash: the yellow crookneck. I found Horn of Plenty’s squash flavorful, and Dixie Hybrid produces well for me. I also grow some straight necks. Multipik (Harris) produces well and the plants are resistant to Cucumber Mosaic, which can...
appear with summer heat and put ugly green mottling on an otherwise gorgeous yellow squash.

Some gardeners report that a white or silver plastic under the squash keeps away the aphids which carry mosaic. Paper or plastic under plants will also block pickle worms, which come up out of the soil and bore tiny holes in the squash. I hate to cut into a squash and find rot inside then discover the tiny hole where a pickle worm entered, dragging in corruption.

Squash enemy #1, the squash vine borer, is the larva of a day flying moth which lays its eggs on the stem, just above the soil line. Hatchlings burrow into the stem, destroying the plant’s root to leaves food transport system. Leaves wilt, and the squash slowly dies. Meanwhile, the larva eats the pith out of the stem, then flees the scene, disappearing into the soil where it pupates and later emerges as a moth.

The first preventive measure is deep tillage early enough to expose the pupa to cold night temperatures. The next preventive step involves injecting bacillus thurengiensis Thuricide (Bt) into the base of the stem, about an inch above the soil. Begin this treatment when the first blooms appear (they attract the moth) and repeat about 10 days later. The Bt will give fatal indigestion to any worm that eats on your squash stems.

The third step is to heap soil over stems at a leaf node so roots will form there. If borers manage to infect the original plant, new young plants will carry on with production. Enemy #2, the striped squash beetle, sucks sap from the leaves, dehydrating the plant to death. Row covers keep out the egg-laying moth. I interplant with marigolds, which may repel the moths. I also check undersides of leaves periodically and crush any egg masses I find.

Squash is one of the least labor-intensive crops I grow. I take out weeds for the first few weeks, then the big leaves shade out the weeds. It takes only moments to bend over and pick two squash for lunch, unlike legume crops, which must be picked one pod at a time. Then comes the fun part. In the kitchen, squash only needs a light scrubbing, the ends cut off, and the whole thing cut into chunks for stewing, slices for sauté, or strips for stir fry.

If you have a problem getting your children to eat vegetables, try adding some yellow squash to macaroni and cheese. They probably won’t even notice it; but the squash adds fiber and vitamins, and also cuts calories and carbohydrates. Zucchini, by shredding it into spaghetti or chili macaroni, just seems like extra noodles.

I can squash the same way my grandmother did, except I use a pressure canner and half as much salt. I cut up squash, and cook it until it’s soft enough to pack solidly in jars. I like to add sweet onions to my squash when I cook them. Then I pack them into the jars, put on lids, and process for 20 minutes at 10 pounds pressure. When I open the jar, I only have to heat the squash and it is ready to eat.

I also freeze some squash. For this, I cook it until it’s quite tender, then cool and pack into freezer containers. I also stir fry zucchini with yellow squash and onion, cool it, pack into containers and freeze it. If I have snow peas and/or broccoli, I add that to the stir fry.

If you haven’t grown summer squash before, maybe you should pencil it into your garden plan for next year. Plant hills about 30 inches apart, and leave a little width between the squash row and whatever is beside it, so you can get in to work the soil and to pick the squash. ©
Potatoes Offer Healthy Sustainability

By Anita B. Stone
North Carolina

It’s been said that each one of us consumes 126 pounds of potatoes each year, including the popular Russet and Idaho baking potatoes, yellow Yukon Gold, Norland Red, Russian Blue, Fingerling, and White Rose potatoes. Most of us enjoy eating potatoes, but only a small number of us grow our own. And yet, planting and harvesting potatoes is one of the simplest and highest-yielding crops to grow.

You can start from seed, but it’s easier and quicker to plant tubers, called “seed potatoes.” Always start with clean, certified seed potatoes purchased from a reputable source to reduce the risk of diseased plants.

Potatoes can be planted in early spring, usually during the month of March here in North Carolina. They like cool weather. In northern climates, potato crops can be planted when dandelions bloom in the fields, while others plant on St. Patrick’s Day. If an unexpected freeze occurs, cover any seedlings or young plants with old blankets, towels or sheets.

The recommended way to plant potatoes is to find a well-drained, fertile site. If the soil is rocky or compact, place the seed potatoes on the ground and cover them with mulch instead of soil, using hay or straw, leaves or grass clip-

pings. I used an organic method of weed control by placing the seed pieces on the soil surface and covering them with about six inches of straw. The sprouts emerged through the straw and weed growth was inhibited. This worked well and kept the tubers cool, the soil moist and easy to harvest.

Because my site is about one acre, I surrounded it with chicken wire fencing. I used the old-fashioned trenching method and then hilled them, just as you would with mulch. Hilling also discourages weeds and gradually creates sufficient space for the tubers to develop.

Dig a trench about eight inches deep and six inches wide at the top, tapering at the bottom to about three inches wide. Place the seed potatoes cut-side down (eye up) about 12 inches apart in the trench. Cover the area with three to four inches of soil. Straw can be used to top it off. Watch for green leaves to pop out from the soil in about two weeks.

Foliage will grow from the eye of the potato. If the potatoes have already sprouted, just leave the sprouts in place when you plant. If you can’t plant the potatoes immediately, place them in the refrigerator or in a cool, dark place where they will not dry out.

When the stem begins to show above ground and grows about eight inches tall, hill up again using a hoe to gently fill the trench with more soil. Leave about four inches of the plant showing. Repeat the procedure about three weeks later, then again after several weeks have passed. It is best to hill up in the morning when plants stand tall.

Plant potatoes in the same spot for a maximum of four years, then rotate the area with something other than the potato (nightshade) family, including tomatoes, eggplant, and peppers (green, yellow, red and hot).

Instead, plant beans, peas, corn or cabbage. Or use a rye cover crop for one year.

If you prefer early yields, seed potatoes can be pre-sprouted in a process called “chitting out,” or “greening.” To do this, just lay them in a shallow tray not touching and put them into a warm place with a temperature of about 70°F with medium light. The potatoes may turn green but this is okay for seed potatoes. Once they begin to sprout, simply plant them being careful not to break the sprouts.

Potatoes are easy to grow, even in large numbers.
Diseases can be devastating. Recognizing diseases can improve the crop and save the potatoes before they fall prey to a slow decline.

Scab occurs from perpetual cropping; therefore, crop rotation is a must and is the first rule in disease control. But awareness will often save the crops. Potatoes need moisture to develop good tubers. They are shallow-rooted and become sensitive to a lack of moisture. Because potato pests are extremely common, watch for clues that nature is invading the crops. Slugs enjoy damp mulch.

If your soil is extremely alkaline it will encourage scab fungus, which causes barklike growth on the skin of potatoes, resembling warts. Scab can be pared away for eating but it stays in the soil for years and will affect each crop.

Treat the soil by adding more acidic components. A pH should read between 4.5 and 5.5. Add sulfur at a rate of about one-half pound over the top of a 15- to 20-foot trench and plant scab resistant varieties, including resistant cultivars like Norland, Goldrush, Katahdin, Kennebec, Russet, Superior and Red Pontiac. Or, gently toss newly cut pieces of seed potatoes with sulfur in a plastic bag before planting, in much the same way you would bread chicken for frying.

The Colorado potato beetle displays a black and yellow stripe figure and is extremely destructive. Handpick the bugs and dunk them into a container of soapy water and mash them with the back of an old spoon. Then check for small yellow eggs in clusters underneath the leaves. If you find any, spray the leaves with insecticidal soap, which can also be used to combat the beetle as well as aphids.

Blight caused the devastating Irish Potato Famine in the 1800s and still threatens potatoes today. Late blight appears as brown or black lesions on foliage or stems. Wet leaves and high humidity favor the disease, but infected seed potatoes and plant debris spread late blight. Plant disease resistant varieties and space enough area between rows for air movement. Keep away from sunflowers since they inhibit the growth of potatoes. It’s been said that if you spot lamb’s quarters growing in your patch, you will have a poor crop.

Use a clean, sharp knife to cut large tubers into pieces from one to four ounces, each, making sure there is an eye or more on each piece. Keep plenty of flesh around the eyes because this is the food that the plant will require during the beginning weeks of growth.

**HARVESTING**

Early potatoes mature in about 55 days. Late potatoes develop in 90 days or more. About two or three weeks after the potato plants flower, which is a sign of healthy tubers, check for a crop of new spuds. Carefully poke into the potato hill with your hand to see what you can find. Check out potatoes from several plants carefully without damaging the roots.

For mature potatoes, wait until the foliage wilts and dies back before harvesting. Choose a day when the soil is dry and work in the morning hours when it isn’t hot. Use a digging fork or trowel and gently dig or lift the potatoes out of the hill, careful not to stab their skins. If the soil is wet, let the potatoes air dry on the surface before gathering them, but don’t expose them to too much sunlight.

If you want to keep some of your crop for winter use, “cure” them by toughening up the skin before storing them. Leave the potatoes in the ground for another two weeks or store recently dug potatoes in a dark and humid place at 60–65°F for two weeks. Don’t wash the potatoes because the skins will get damaged.

After curing, keep the potatoes in a dark, dry, cool area. If stored colder than 30–40°F the potatoes will rot; above 50°F the potatoes will begin to sprout. Burlap bags, slotted crates or baskets are ideal containers and often a cellar, shed or a garage is a good storage spot. Also, be sure not to store potatoes with apples because the ethylene gas that apples give off will promote potato sprouting. If you’re faced with potatoes that begin to sprout while in storage, you can place dried lavender or sage in with the potatoes.

Alternative potato cropping is performed by farmers and urban dwellers. Some people grow potatoes in a sandy loam inside a free-draining barrel. The trick is to add more soil as the vine grows and when fall frosts arrive, begin the harvest. Never bury the vine completely. Also, make sure the barrel is placed in direct sunlight for maximum growth.
Gourds for Farmers and Homesteaders

BY ANITA B. STONE
RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

There is a legend that says, “If you give or receive a gourd, with it goes all the best in life; health, happiness and other good things.”

Anytime of year is excellent to think about growing gourds, sometimes referred to as “nature’s pottery.” The original shapes of clay pottery is thought to have been modeled on the shapes of certain gourds to make grain storage containers and musical instruments, such as rattles, drums, horns, whistles, and flutes. They were even made into elaborate stringed instruments and thumb pianos. Some cultures turned gourds into birdhouses and hats. These are the ornamental gourds.

Originally, women were prohibited from gourd cultivation in Europe. That idea certainly has changed in the modern world.

So how does one describe a gourd? It is no surprise that a gourd is a member of the cucumber family along with squash, pumpkins and melons. The tendrils grow on the vine near the fruit and the leaves are usually five-lobed. Both male and female blossoms are known to grow on the same vine. Gourds are numerous and offer variety. For example, you can grow a “hard shell” gourd in the shape of a bottle, a dipper, a trough, or a snake. For this type of gourd it is suggested to plant seeds as soon as the soil warms in the spring. In southern climates it is safe to plant gourd seeds around the end of April. However, if you plant too early, your seed can rot. If you plant too late, the gourd will not mature at frost. So it can be a tricky proposition. But if you pay attention to temperatures you can easily plant, sow, and harvest gourds.

The ideal pH conditions should range from 6.0 to 6.5. To raise the pH levels, add lime, wood ash, organic matter or seaweed. To reduce pH levels, add sulfur, peat moss, evergreen needles, and ground bark.

Pay particular attention to ornamental gourds, as they are not edible and offer very little flesh. They are grown mainly for show. The flesh they do contain is tasteless and may even be bitter.

To begin a gourd garden is a simple task with several choices. In spring, after the final frost, plant gourd seeds. It is preferable to soak seeds overnight to speed germination. If you decide to start seeds indoors, use peat pots or similar sized containers. Indoor plantings lengthen the growing season.

All gourds sprawl, so give the seedlings room to grow. Black fabric mulch helps keep weeds down between the hills and raises the soil temperature as well. Mulch is an excellent protective coating and provides thick cover for gourds. You can also use straw, grass clippings, shredded leaves and newspapers. Space four to six seeds about twice the length of the seed per dug hole, in hills six feet apart and in rows at least four feet apart. If you keep the seeds moist, they typically germinate in eight to 10 days, but can sprout as long as six weeks after planting. Most early growth is underground, so don’t despair if you don’t see much happening the first month or so. Gourds need at least six hours of daily sun and well-fertilized soils. Regular watering throughout the growing season is a must, especially right after you plant.
Wet leaves become susceptible to mildew and other fungal problems, so it is preferable not to use overhead watering systems for this crop.
green-striped with bands or areas of yellow.

Once a gourd has reached its prime growth, there are two steps to curing. Surface drying is the first step and takes about one week. During this time, the skin hardens and the exterior color of the gourd is set. Place the clean, dry fruit in a well-ventilated area and arrange gourds in a single layer. Make sure the fruits do not touch each other.

Internal drying is the second step and takes about four weeks. Adequate curing in a dark, warm area will accelerate drying and discourage decay. When the gourd becomes light in weight and the seeds can be heard rattling inside, your gourds are ready to use.

Seeds saved from gourds grown in your garden will likely produce an assortment of fruit of different shapes, sizes and colors, none of which may resemble the fruit from which the seed was saved.

Ornamental gourds make impressive decorations, which are prized for fall color schemes. A bowl filled with gourds makes an ideal table centerpiece. Dried and crafter gourds are always fun to see at annual state gourd festivals which are usually held in the fall of each year and you can always purchase gourd seeds to begin your own gourd garden.

When you purchase gourd seeds, feel confident at a garden center or through catalogues. These seeds have satisfactory germination rates and are true to variety. If you collected seeds from a gourd that was allowed to freeze while it was green, the seeds will not germinate. Freezing kills fresh seeds. Dry seeds can be stored in the freezer without affecting germination rate. You can also use seeds from the inside of any gourd that has been dried. One year I placed a handful of viable seeds inside a plastic bag where they received moisture within a warm environment. The seeds did well and sprouted. When each one displayed four leaves per stem, they were ready to be transplanted outdoors. Make sure you use the “hardening off” technique for beneficial growth. The process of hardening off is to keep seedlings safe from sudden temperature changes. It gradually exposes young plants to the elements of wind, sun and rain and toughens them to help prevent transplant shock. If not processed properly the seedlings may die. Flexibility is the key word. Be prepared to take good care of baby plants through fluctuation of temperatures. And if there is a sudden late freeze, ice or snow, bring them indoors as you would any youngster to protect them from drastic shock. Using diligence you can figure out a method for each type of seedling that you transplant from an indoor temperature to an outdoor temperature. I have always chosen to set the transplants in their small pots outdoors in the sun for a brief period of time each day, slowly increasing the amount of time until the plant is totally ready to stay outdoors. You can do this with any seedling. You can also avoid transplant shock by using a heated germination mat, which is available in any garden center.

All gourds are susceptible to disease, much like squash, pumpkins and cucumbers. So be on the lookout for the cucumber beetle, aphids, slugs, snails, and squash borers. You can easily forego any fungicides and herbicides by selecting a safe organic insecticidal soap, which not only protects the soil and the environment, but also prevents any ground toxins. Should you see powdery mildew, you can employ the same practices on the gourds.

“Gourds are as promiscuous as alley cats and will cross with each other,” says James Underwood Crockett of The Victory Garden. “The fruit that results from initial crosses looks and tastes exactly like the variety that you plant...there’s no telling what kind of gourd mongrel will result.” Gourds are an easy and fun crop to grow and have become so useful in many areas, including food utensils, ornamental beauty for any season, bird nesting houses, excellent craft creations and you can even keep them as musical instruments if you desire, especially those with seeds inside the hardened skin. Take a look around the neighborhood, along country roads and urban gardens and you will see a variety of gourds, whether painted, plain or cut, being used for multiple purposes. Gourds represent a plethora of uses and have done so for hundreds of years, and will undoubtedly remain an excellent crop for the future.

Decorative, edible or both?
Celebrating the Goodness of Fresh Vegetables

Serving Up the Harvest
175 Simple Recipes

By Andrea Chesman

Andrea Chesman is a cook and gardener who knows what it’s like to be staring down pounds of vegetables and panicking about how to use them all before it’s too late. Simple. Delicious. Planned to fit the season. That’s the approach Chesman brings to the 175 simple recipes packed into this creative volume. The vegetables are organized seasonally by crop-readiness, so you can move through the book, trying new recipes, as the growing season progresses. There are many vegetarian options, but even when combined with meat, vegetables get top billing.

Visit: iamcountrysidem.com/shop
Or Call: 970-392-4419
Plant Pumpkins Now For Fall Faces Later

If you want a Jack-o-lantern for Halloween, a big pumpkin for harvest season decor, or pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving, you can grow just what you need. Growing pumpkins is not labor intensive; you just need time, space, and lots of water.

For a bragging size pumpkin, allow plenty of space. Atlantic Giant (Harris Seeds) grows on 25-foot vines and requires 125 days to mature. Weighing in at 200 pounds-plus, this one can serve as centerpiece for a yard arrangement. The standard Howden (Park’s Seeds) needs 10 square feet and produces 20-pound pumpkins in about 90 days. Smaller varieties will grow on a trellis, and Magic Lantern (Harris) is semi-vining. Jack Be Little (Burpee) needs only 90 days to produce three-inch fruits for table decorations.

Most gardeners will need only one or two hills of pumpkins. I put mine near okra, pole beans, and peppers, which continue to bear until frost. This area is cultivated and irrigated through the late summer. Since roots grow to three feet down, and large leaves transpire profusely, pumpkins need regular watering.

Pumpkin seeds should go into the ground three weeks after the last spring frost, or four months before the first fall frost. The USDA tells us “pumpkins have best quality if harvest is delayed until after the vines are seneesent or have been killed by frost.” In Low-country South Carolina, hot, dry days make it difficult to start seeds in mid-summer. A bit of Grandma wisdom: “leave a hose dripping on the pumpkin hill until the vines are up and growing.” Grandma also had her own variety of pumpkin which originated generations ago—a medium sized fruit with buff colored skin and orange flesh.

Pumpkins like a pH around neutral (7.0) or just a bit alkaline (7.5). If my pH meter shows a lower reading, I add a bit of lime. I dig a fairly large hole and put two shovelfuls of rotted bedding from the goat barn and henhouse. I cover this with several inches of soil, and place four seeds in a depression on top. I mulch to preserve moisture and keep down weeds which rob the plants of nutrients.

Pumpkins have both male and female blooms on the same plant and bees are the best pollinators. For that reason, I avoid putting poisons on or near the pumpkin patch, especially in the morning, when bees are most active.

Squash bugs may nibble on pumpkin leaves. The dingy brown bug, about a half-inch long, may be seen on top of leaves during the day. In the cool of the morning or evening, squash bugs rest under plants or in the mulch. When crushed, the insect gives off a bad odor, like a stink bug. I destroy clusters of brick red eggs, as well as the bugs. I crush them or drop into a container of water with insecticidal soap added.

If I find a section of the vine wilted, I look for yellow “sawdust” indicating the work of vine borers. I cut off the wilted stem, and slit it open to find the inch-long worm, white with a brown head. Left to mature, these worms burrow into the soil to pupate. In the south, there are two generations during one summer. Obviously, I must stop this worm now.

I also use natural repellants. Since insects find food sources through chemicals produced by the plant, interplanting with something less appealing for the insect may encourage him to go elsewhere for lunch. I plant many marigolds.

By Nancy Pierson Farries
South Carolina
among my vegetables. Their bright blooms decorate the garden and their strong smell confuses insects. Herbs such as garlic, mint, and rosemary, also give off odors that repel insects.

In the pumpkin patch, after several fruits set, I pinch back the vines, which allows nutrients to concentrate on production. I place a piece of cardboard or plastic under each pumpkin to shield it from pickleworms. These little worms come up from the soil and bore through the skin, leaving only a tiny hole, but trailing bacteria get into the fruit so it will rot from the inside.

When the pumpkins turn color and the stem looks dry, I cut each from the vine. The skin is relatively soft, so I handle the fruit with care. Stored in a dry place, away from direct sunlight, the pumpkins will keep for a few months. As I have time, I will get the pumpkins into long-term storage.

To freeze, I cook the pumpkin, cool it, and pack into containers.

To can, I put cooked pumpkin into jars and process for an hour in my pressure canner.

Seeds are washed, then dried for an hour in a slow (250°F) oven. A light spray of olive oil and a sprinkle of salt turns pumpkin seeds into a delightful snack food.

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**Steamed Pumpkin Bread**

Mix:
- 1/4 cup canola oil
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons molasses

Add:
- 1 cup mashed pumpkin
- 2 beaten eggs
- 1/4 cup buttermilk

Beat in:
- 1 cup plain flour
- 1/2 cup whole wheat flour
- 1/2 cup oat bran
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg

Stir in:
- 1/2 cup raisins
- 1/2 cup chopped nuts

Place in a greased 1-1/2 quart mold (I use my rice steamer) and steam for about an hour. (Insert a toothpick a little off center; it should come out clean.)

When I had youngsters, I grew enough pumpkins so each child could practice his/her artistry by carving a Jack-o-lantern. When I bake pumpkin pie, I make eyes, nose and mouth from pie dough—bake the pie for awhile, then put facial features on top when the filling is starting to set.

For my family, pumpkins become the faces of autumn.
The Mix & Match Guide to Companion Planting

By Josie Jeffery

131 Pages
Hardcover, Spiral Bound

The Mix & Match Guide to Companion Planting is a colorful visual gardening guide to which vegetables, fruits, and herbs grow best with one another, and which do not. People are again turning to the age-old practice of companion planting as an effective way to avoid chemicals and reduce labor simply by placing the right plants next to each other in the garden.

iamcountryside.com/shop/mix-match-guide-to-companion-planting