

# Cyndi's Veggie Gardening Tips

Edited excerpt from *Real Food from a Real Farm, Eating through the Seasons*,  
by Cyndi Stuart, copyright 2015

## The Basics:

- **Start small and the mistakes are small** – there is no need to till 5 acres your first year – you can begin with 1 or 2 raised beds (measuring 4'x8' or less) and enjoy a good sized harvest while you are learning.
- **Plants will grow if planted at the right time** – so get to know your veggies and understand who likes it hot and who can handle the cold.
- **Vegetables like Sunshine** – you will need to find the sunniest location on your property before putting in the effort to build and fill raised beds, or till under a garden plot. Try to stay clear of trees and shrubs that will be competing for sunlight, water and nutrients.
- **Good Soil makes all the difference** – let's face it, most of us have lousy soil. There are only a select few who lucked out with half-way decent dirt. It really can't be stressed enough, **build up the fertility of your soil and most of the work is done for you.** You will water less, weed less and have more time to enjoy the harvest.
- **Seeds** – pick varieties with the shortest growing season. We are always fighting the weather, so read the seed packets and pick varieties that not only sound tasty, but take less time to reach maturity.
- **Keep a Journal** – it doesn't have to be anything more than a spiral notebook with notes for planting dates and a season wrap-up, but it helps with planning year to year.

## Companion & Rotation Planting

**Companions:** Two plants that get along well are radishes and carrots. If you direct sow carrots and radish seeds together, the radishes will come up within a few days helping to mark your carrot row. Radishes mature quickly and as you pull the radishes the carrots will be thinned at the same time.

**Adversaries:** Plants in the Allium genus; onions, garlic, shallots and leeks, can stunt the growth of peas and beans (legumes). It is best to make sure they are not planted together. This is called the '**onion effect**'.

**Rotation:** Vegetables do better if they aren't planted in the same spot every year, so you will need to rotate the plants. Plant rotation is as easy or as hard as you make it. Carrots are a good example. A little nematode likes to burrow into the carrots and lay its eggs in the soil. Shifting the carrots to a new location takes away the nematodes food source, thus reducing the critter problem.

With two existing raised beds it is easy, just clean out the beds of any woody roots left over from the year before, stir in some good organic matter into the existing soils to a depth of about 6-8" and flip-flop the plantings. When looking at a full vegetable garden plot, try thinking of it as 4 quadrants. Starting in the left hand corner, you can rotate clockwise each year.

## Cool Season Vegetables

**BE AWARE!** Most of the following vegetables are a delicacy of the local rabbits and their baby bunnies! If a problem in your area, protect plants with 1" wire fencing about 2' high once the seeds have sprouted and when transplanting starts. So advises the voice of experience!

The easiest way to distinguish the cool growing season from the warm is just what you think... heat. But you need to take that a bit further and think about soil temperature. This will make the difference when planting seeds and starts. You can get fancy and use a soil thermometer or once we start seeing overnight lows in the low to mid-50's we are moving into the warm season.

Here is a short list of what does well in the cool season. Focusing on these plants will make you not only feel successful but very productive.

## Lettuce & Spinach

There are two main forms of lettuce; leaf (also called romaine) and head lettuce. Leaf lettuce forms an open top with the main leaves reaching up instead of curling in to form a head. Head lettuce leaves grow around each other to form a tight bunch.

**Tip: Once the lettuce reaches about 5-6" you can begin trimming the plants, leaving at least 3" remaining. Yes, you can do this with head lettuce also. It will extend the use of the head lettuce varieties... you just won't have a cute little head to harvest.**

Spinach does better in rich, fertile soil with good compost added **BUT** dislikes acid. If you plan to integrate vegetables into your landscape, keep the spinach away from the blueberries that thrive in acid soils.

**Note: Seeds for both Lettuce and Spinach will germinate with soil temperatures as low as 45 degrees. This makes them great for sowing seeds directly into the garden plot.**

**Tip: Lettuce, spinach, cabbage and brussel sprouts are all leaf producing veggies. They will enjoy rich soil with lots of organic matter, such as composted manures, fish meal,**

bone meals, etc. Nitrogen is the key ingredient for leaf production, so these are the plants who will love extra compost.

### Cabbage, Cauliflower, Broccoli & Brussel Sprouts

All three of these are members of the Brassica family, making them different from lettuce and greens. When direct seeding, they like soil temperatures to be a bit warmer (about 55 degrees), so plant starts for the best success. **Tip: Make your first planting from starts and then about 3-4 weeks later, when the weather improves, direct seed a second crop.**

Brussel sprouts and cabbage store very well. A sharp frost can make them sweeter and tender. You will experience this during a fall harvest when you pick after the first frost.

### Peas

You will have a choice between bush or pole varieties. Bush varieties bloom and ripen faster than poles, so planting some of each extends your harvest. **Tip: Peas produce better on a trellis, even the bush varieties.**

### Carrots, Beets & Swiss Chard

All do well from seed and require very little care once in ground. Carrots, beets and Swiss Chard are the few veggies that seem to produce better when planted in rows. After several years of experimenting with both broadcasting seed and row planting, the winning method has been row planting.

### Warm Season Vegetables

As noted above, what separates the cool plants from the warm ones is **HEAT**. Now we get down to the real challenge of growing vegetables in our cranky northwest weather. For most warm season veggies there needs to be no risk of frost and a soil temperature of at least 60 degrees with an optimum of 65 for seed germination. Meaning, we need daytime temperatures to stay in the mid to high 70's (or warmer) and the night time temperatures to be in the high 50's. **Tip: For warm season veggies, like tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers, plant starts after the last frost date, don't sow seed! For cucumbers, squash, corn and beans sow seeds once the soil is warm enough and the last frost date has passed.**

Up until this point the veggie garden has been a piece of cake. *It all changes when dealing with these plants...*

### Tomatoes

This is the Holy Grail for all west-of-the-cascade gardeners. You will pamper them, cajole them, swear at them and spend hours online searching for one fool-proof promise of red mouth-watering tomatoes hanging off the vine in late August.

Here is the bad news... there is no works-every-time method for getting ripe tomatoes before our weather turns cold, rainy, and icky in Sept/Oct. What we need is a HOT summer and a late fall. However, here are some ideas for doing the very best we can with what we've got.

#### Tomatoes need heat, good air circulation and support.

Heat we leave mostly to Mother Nature, although there are some products like water walls and red mats that seems to increase the temperature around the plant. Air circulation goes along with watering technique. Tomatoes are prone to blight, so soaker hoses are recommended instead of top watering. Now, you are asking, 'What if it rains?' Well, welcome to the northwest. You have to do the best you can. Also, provide a good support for the plant. You will see a much better yield and improved fruit quality if you keep the tomatoes supported by a cage or tied to a trellis/fence.

You will see two terms when buying tomatoes: **determinate and indeterminate**. Determinate plants tend to be shorter and bushy (still need supports) and they set flowers and fruit over a short period of time. This means the fruit will ripen all at once making them good canning varieties.

Indeterminate plants (like cherry tomatoes) will flower and fruit throughout the entire season, thus extending the harvest time.

**Tip: to encourage fruit to ripen faster towards the end of the season on an indeterminate tomato, prune off the flowers and tops of plants. The plant will then send energy to the fruit instead of trying to bloom and grow.**

**Rule of Thumb: Tomatoes (and other warm season veggies) shouldn't go outside unprotected on the West Side of the Cascades until around Mother's Day (approx. May 10-12th)! However, if you live closer to the water (Puget Sound or coastline), you may be able to put out starts earlier given your marine influence.**



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