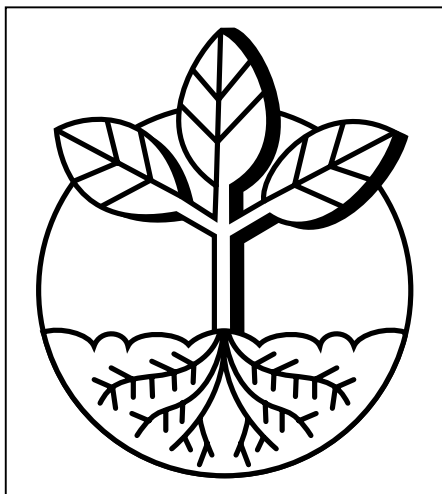


Growing Better Vegetable Plants

There is nothing quite like eating fresh vegetables out of your own garden. The sweat and love that go into growing your own food seem to make it taste better. Actually, it might taste better! Produce from a farm must be picked, packed, and shipped in order to get it to the market and then to you. Farmers usually choose varieties that look good, pick easily, pack well, and hold up well in storage. Flavor is not as important as those factors, as long as it tastes reasonably good. You can choose varieties that taste good and grow well in your soil and climate. So your vegetables *really* do taste better!

You can grow your own transplants from seed, purchase them from local greenhouses, or order them from catalogs or web sites. If you grow your own transplants it is easy to get exactly the vegetable varieties you want from seed companies. If you are purchasing transplants from local greenhouses or catalogs, you may have fewer choices.



What makes a healthy vegetable transplant?

- ◆ The leaves should look green and healthy with no visible signs of dry or burnt leaf tips. It is okay for the first or bottom leaves to be dead or dying. Those were the seed leaves and they have done their job.

- ◆ Plants should be bug free. Make sure you look under the leaves. If you see small white flies or dark fly-looking fungus gnats buzzing around plants, leave those plants behind.

Even though the insects will die once you

plant the transplant outside, there is no reason to buy plants that are already damaged.

- ◆ Pull the plant gently but firmly out of the pot. The roots should form a tight ball in the pot without a tight mass at the bottom. If there is a tight mass of roots it will have to be removed before planting.

- ◆ The stem should be free of marks and bruises, and the soil free of algae – that green coating on the soil surface.

How do you know which varieties to choose?

Taste and try new varieties. Ask other gardeners in the area! Visit plant trials at garden centers and research plots. Look for events like tomato tastings in the local news. Penn State hosts plant trials at a number of research facilities across Pennsylvania. These sites are open to the public and many have reports summarizing their findings. These reports can help you make variety selections for the coming year.

Penn State Cooperative has a series of consumer Fact Sheets that list many excellent varieties. Look for and read the following Fact Sheet series, available at any PSU Cooperative Extension office:

Growing Bulb Crops	Growing Leafy Vegetables	Growing Peas
Growing Peppers	Growing Potatoes	Growing Root Crops
Growing Sweet Corn	Growing Tomatoes & Eggplants	

Ohio State Cooperative Extension has a series on home vegetable gardening that is easy to access online at <http://ohioline.osu.edu/>

How do I care for my vegetable plants?

Have your soil tested by the PSU Testing Lab. You can get a soil test kit from any PSU Cooperative Extension Office. When you get the results back you should add lime and/or fertilizers according to the soil test recommendations. Fertile soil will help you grow better plants.

The only reason to rush out early and buy members of the tomato family (peppers, eggplants, and potatoes) and cucurbit family (melons, cucumbers, squash and pumpkins) is to make sure you get the varieties you want. These plants need warm weather to grow, so don't set them out before the last frost unless you are willing to cover them during frost. Set the plants in a sunny spot outdoors to help them "harden off" and get ready to live outside rather than in a greenhouse.

When you are planting your transplants, remember that tomatoes are the only plants that can be planted deeper than they currently grow. All of the other transplants you purchase should be planted at the depth at which they grow in their pots.

What are the biggest mistakes that gardeners make in growing and handling vegetable transplants?

- ◆ Starting the seeds too early or too late: Many seed catalogs will give you information on when to start your seeds based on your ideal planting date
- ◆ Not enough light - the earlier you start your plants indoors, the bigger the problem you could create. If you do not have a greenhouse or light table, you might want to reconsider growing your own transplants.
- ◆ Starting seeds too cold: Most of the popular crops that are grown from transplants require some soil heat to get started. Consider buying a bottom heat source to provide the heat seeds need to germinate.
- ◆ Over or under watering: The small size of a transplant pot means you have to monitor the soil carefully because it wets quickly and dries out quickly. A constant moist, but not wet, condition is best for growing transplants. The same goes for plants in the ground.

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