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How to plant a fall vegetable garden in South Florida

It's time to plant your vegetable garden. Here's how to do it like a pro.

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A wonderful thing happens every fall in South Florida: The rain and heat of summer finally let up, and the weeks are filled with days of long sunshine, lower temperatures and moderate rainfall.

In other words, it's vegetable season here in South Florida. And that means zucchini and squash, eggplants, leafy greens, peppers of all varieties — and tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes.

According to the University of Florida IFAS Extension, tomatoes are the most important commercial plant in Florida, and the most popular vegetable in home gardens. And for good reason: We can grow great tomatoes. Healthy vines can quickly overpower 8-foot cages, and you'll find yourself overwhelmed with luscious, home-grown fruit.

But there are a few challenges to growing great vegetables in our Mediterranean winters, so if you're thinking of doing tomatoes and vegetables this year, you'll probably start by getting dirty.

The dirt on South Florida

Soil chemistry can be a little complicated, but getting it right is half the battle for good vegetables.

Margie Pikarsky, owner and operator of Bee Heaven Farm in Redland, doesn't like to say that South Florida has "poor" soil — just different.

"It tests as deficient for everything," Pikarsky says.

Native South Florida soil is derived from limestone, which means it's very alkaline, or has a pH greater than seven. Tomatoes and most vegetables don't like alkaline soil, and even worse, the high alkalinity makes it



harder for plants to get nutrients.

All this is a fancy way of saying you have a choice to make: Either grow your vegetables in big containers, or improve the native soil before you plant.

"I would recommend raised beds or container gardening," says Maria Marchegiani, master gardener coordinator in Plantation and a coordinator for schoolyard gardens. "In our schoolyard gardens, we use 4-by-4 beds that are 3 feet tall and fill them with ordinary potting mix that we get in big bags."

If this sounds like too much work, you can add organic matter directly to the soil. Simply dig a decent-sized hole and mix soil amendments straight into the ground.

At Bee Heaven, which is a certified organic farm, farmers work plenty of compost into the soil before planting tomatoes and vegetables. Other growers use sphagnum peat moss, worm castings, composted cow manure or just a bag or two of potted soil mix from the garden center. A good rule of thumb is to add at least 50 percent organic material before you plant.

This extra step will naturally lower the pH of the soil because most organic material is slightly acidic, add in valuable nutrients and even reduce the risk of nematodes (see sidebar).

Planting, feeding tomatoes

Once the beds are ready, you can plant anytime from mid-October through December.

Of all the veggies, tomatoes will require the most prep work. The most popular tomatoes are indeterminate, which means they're large vines that will need to be staked up on some kind of supporting framework. You can use trellises, concrete reinforcing wire or simply poles strung with wire.

When planting young tomato vines, it's a good idea to remove a few of the lower leaves and sink the vine deep into the soil. New roots will emerge from along the vine, resulting in a tougher, healthier plant. After planting, spread mulch over the soil and water gently to soak the surrounding soil.

While they're growing, tomatoes appreciate an even hand with watering. Too much or too little water, and the fruit will be destroyed. This might mean watering every other morning, or whatever is in accordance with local [Water restrictions](#). Just be consistent.

Never water tomatoes from above. They should always be watered at ground level to prevent fungus.

Once they're growing, there are probably as many approaches to feeding tomato plants as there are people growing tomatoes. Organic gardeners like Pikarsky use certified organic fertilizers like composted chicken or turkey manure.

"Organic tomatoes are juicier and have better flavor," Pikarsky says. "And they're softer. A ripe tomato should be soft, not hard and unyielding."

Still other growers use granular or liquid fertilizers (both organic and non-organic) or fertilizer spikes. Some follow elaborate recipes involving fish emulsions, bone meal, blood meal, powdered milk (for calcium) or

Epsom salts (for magnesium).

Whatever you do, there are a few simple principles for feeding tomatoes and other vegetables. For non-leafy veggies like tomatoes and peppers, only use a higher nitrogen fertilizer early in their growth cycle (if at all). This will encourage strong leaf production and healthy vines. However, once the plant begins to flower and set fruit or vegetables, switch to a higher phosphorous fertilizer to encourage strong fruit and vegetable production.

Finally, be watchful for pests, including caterpillars, beetles and other beasts. In many cases, these pests can be treated by simply picking them off the plants by hand and destroying them. If a more serious infestation of caterpillars strikes, use Bt, which is sold as Dipel or Thuricide, according to label directions.

When it comes to harvest, pick your veggies just before peak ripeness — or risk sharing with unwelcome guests.

"Pick them just before they finish turning red or black or yellow or whatever ripe color," Pikarsky said. "Finish ripening them inside. Otherwise, not just the bugs but the birds will attack them."

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