

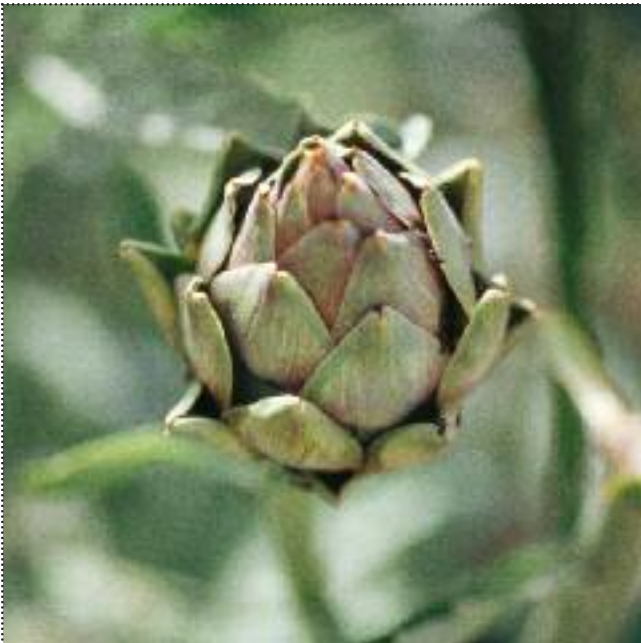
a-to-z

VEGGIE GUIDE

For beginners, veggie gardening can seem overwhelming. Questions pop up like zucchinis in August: What are the best varieties of beans? How deep do I plant onion sets? How long before my squash is ready for harvest? How far apart should I sow carrot seeds? How in the world do you grow asparagus? Where is that bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol?

Whoa! Take a deep, cleansing breath and relax. On the following pages, you'll find just about everything you need to know about the most popular vegetables and herbs. Sowing depths and spacing, special soil needs, the time from planting to harvest, recommended veggie varieties—it's all here at your fingertips.





Artichoke
Cynara scolymus

In the 1500s, artichokes were considered an aphrodisiac, and only men were allowed to partake. Seriously. So go ahead—celebrate your freedom to savor artichoke-spinach dip.

HARDINESS: Grown as a hardy perennial in regions with mild winters; annual elsewhere.

PLANTING ADVICE: Sow artichoke divisions 6 inches deep and 3 to 4 feet apart in fertile, loose and well-draining soil, with the



tops above ground level. Leave 4 to 5 feet between rows, as they grow about 6 feet in diameter and 3 or 4 feet high.

HARVEST TIPS: When the largest artichoke is approximately 2 to 4 inches in diameter, cut off the buds along with 1½ inches of stem. After harvest, cut stalks off at ground level. To store, slice off a coin's-width of the stem, sprinkle water on it and refrigerate in an airtight plastic bag. Use within five to seven days.

veggie bite

An average artichoke produces about 40 or so buds, but a medium-to-large bud yields only about 2 ounces of edible flesh. So plan accordingly when planting.



RECOMMENDATIONS: Big Heart, Desert Globe, Green Globe, Imperial Star.

Asparagus
Asparagus officinalis

Apprehensive about trying to grow these finicky bad boys? Don't be. It's easier than you think, and a smart budget move, since asparagus are expensive. It will be worth the effort when you taste this super-healthy veggie grilled or chilled with a vinaigrette dressing.

HARDINESS: Grown as a hardy perennial.

PLANTING ADVICE: Start asparagus from year-old crowns. Soak briefly in lukewarm water, then plant in well-draining, slightly acidic soil (pH of 6.5). Create a small mound along the middle of a trench. Plant the crowns atop the mound, with the roots draped over the sides, about 12 to 18 inches apart, with 5 or 6 feet between rows. Then bury the crowns 2 inches deep in a mix of one part manure to three parts topsoil. Plants take at least two years to get established.

HARVEST TIPS: Lightly

harvest in spring of the second year. Cut off spears at ground level when they're as thick as a pencil, or roughly 8 inches tall. Store 'em like cut flowers—upright in a container filled with an inch of water.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Jersey Giant, Jersey Prince, Jersey Knight, Viking KBC.

Beans
Phaseolus vulgaris

Also known as string beans or snap beans, easy-to-grow green beans are one of the most popular veggies. Delicious and nutritious, they're a win-win proposition.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Plant bush-bean seeds 1 inch deep and 2 to 4 inches apart, in rows 18 to 24 inches apart. Plant pole-bean seeds 4 to 6 inches apart, with rows 36 inches apart.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to pick in 45 to 60 days. Harvest them before the seeds inside the pods grow too big, or they'll be tough and stringy. To store, refrigerate in airtight plastic bags. To freeze them, trim off the ends, blanch for several minutes in boiling water; dunk them in ice-cold water for the same amount of time; then drain and store in airtight freezer bags for up to 10 months.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Blue Lake, Goldcrop, Kentucky Wonder (heirloom).

Beets
Beta vulgaris

No matter how you serve these sweet beauties—boiled, baked, pickled or in tasty Russian borscht—you can't beat beets for flavor and nutrition. Don't waste the savory greens: Steam them, then top with lemon juice and butter.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: A beet "seed" is actually a dried fruit that contains a bunch of seeds and produces several seedlings. Plant them ½ inch deep and 1 inch apart, with 12 to 18 inches between rows. Thin seedlings to one every 3 inches.

HARVEST TIPS: Beets mature in about 49 to 56 days, depending on the variety. Pull mature fruits when they're 1½ to 3 inches in diameter.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Little Ball (miniature), Green Top Bunching and Crosby Egyptian (for tasty greens).

Broccoli
Brassica oleracea italica

Italian immigrants brought broccoli to America in the earl 1800s, and gardens haven't been the same since. And that's a good thing. Mangia!

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Plant seeds ¼ to ½ inch deep and 18 inches apart; plant seedlings a little deeper than they were set indoors.

Space rows 36 inches apart.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to harvest in about 55 to 60 days, when the central head is 4 to 6 inches in diameter. Don't wait too long, or the florets will become flowers. Broccoli keeps in the fridge for a couple of weeks in airtight plastic bags. To freeze it, cut the head into bite-sized chunks, leaving a little stem on each piece, and cut any leftover stems into 1-inch lengths. Blanch them for 3 minutes in boiling water; dunk them in ice-cold water for the same amount of time; then drain and store in airtight freezer bags for up to 6 months.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Cruiser (drought-tolerant), Green Comet, Green Goliath.

Brussels Sprouts
Brassica oleracea gemmifera

Brussels sprouts are tasty. Honest! As a kid, you were probably force-fed overcooked, mushy sprouts. But properly prepared, they're a delight—not to mention packed with



vitamins and minerals.

HARDINESS: Grown as a biennial.

PLANTING ADVICE: Sow seeds four to five weeks before transplanting in early summer. Be sure to transplant at least 90 days before the first threat of frost. Sow seedlings 2 to 3 feet apart, with rows at least 2 feet apart. They grow about 3 feet tall and produce clusters of about 20 to 40 sprouts.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to pick in about 90 days, when the sprouts are firm and 1 inch in diameter, and before leaves turn yellow. Brussels sprouts keep in the fridge for about 10 days inside an airtight bag, and for up to a year if frozen. To freeze, blanch in boiling water for 3 minutes, dunk them in ice-cold water for 3 more; then drain and store in airtight freezer bags.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Bubbles, Oliver, Royal Marvel, Rubine (red sprouts), Valiant.



veggie bite

For an extended beet harvest, plant a crop every three to four weeks through midsummer.

Cabbage

Brassica oleracea var. capitata

From coleslaw to sauerkraut, cabbage has clout. A member of the same family that brings you broccoli and Brussels sprouts, cabbage is packed with vitamins K and C, and it's inexpensive to boot. So cash in on the crunch!

HARDINESS: Grown as a hardy annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Plant seedlings 12 to 24 inches apart in rows spaced 24 to 32 inches apart. Sow seeds about ½ inch deep, and thin seedlings to one every 12 inches. Extend your harvest by planting varieties that mature at different times.

HARVEST TIPS: Pick the heads after they're firm and fully formed, and before they crack open. If you leave outer leaves intact, smaller heads may form for a later harvest.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Cheers and Early Jersey Wakefield (green), Savoy King (crinkly leaves, heat-tolerant), Red Meteor and Ruby Ball (red).

Carrots

Daucus carota

Ironically, Mel Blanc, the voice of Bugs Bunny, didn't care for carrots. What's up with that? They're packed with vitamin A, which is good for your eyes and skin. And what about that satisfying crunch as you bite into a freshly pulled carrot? Ahhh—it's love at first bite.

HARDINESS: Grown as a hardy annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Sow this cool-weather crop in early spring. Soak seeds for six hours, then plant them ¼ to ½ inch deep, two to three seeds per inch, in light, well-draining soil. Keep rows 1 to 1½ feet apart. When sprouts are 1 inch tall, thin them to two per inch for



veggie bite

One-half cup of carrots contains four times the recommended daily allowance of vitamin A in the form of beta carotene, the substance that makes carrots orange.



small varieties and one every 1 to 2 inches for larger carrots. For continuous harvest, plant a new crop every three to four weeks until midsummer.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to pick in 65 to 80 days, depending on the variety. Harvest small varieties when the roots are about ½ inch in diameter, 1 inch for larger varieties. To store, cut off the leafy tops 1 inch above the roots and refrigerate for four to six months in perforated plastic bags.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Orbit (small round), Little Finger (baby), Red-Cored Chantenay, Danvers 126, Sweetness, Imperator 58.

seedlings so they're 4 to 6 inches apart.

HARVEST TIPS: Cut off outer leaves about 1½ inches above ground level when they're 6 to 8 inches tall; younger leaves pack more flavor. Avoid nicking the terminal bud in the center.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Burgundy (red), Fordhook Giant and Perpetual (white), Rainbow (mixed red, yellow and white).

Chard

Beta vulgaris L. subsp. cicla

Great taste and nutritional value. Low maintenance and high disease resistance. Grows in shade and poor soil. Colorful leaves that double as ornamentals. What's not to like about chard? Also known as Swiss chard (though not native to Switzerland), this veggie is amazing when sautéed in olive oil with garlic.

HARDINESS: Grown as a hardy annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: In early or midspring, plant seeds 1/2 to 3/4 inch deep, about eight to 10 seeds per foot. Thin

Corn

Zea mays

No sweet corn in summer? That would be a bummer. Nothing's as fabulous as fresh corn on the cob, slathered with butter and sprinkled with salt. Or try brushing on some olive oil and your favorite seasoning blend. Don't forget the napkins.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Plant seeds ½ inch deep and 9 to 12 inches apart, with 30 to 36 inches between rows. If you plant more than one variety of the dozens available, plant two or more

rows of the same variety side by side to promote cross-pollination.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to harvest in 75 to 100 days, depending on the variety. Pick the ears when kernels are smooth and plump, about three weeks after the first silk strands appear. A good test: Prick a kernel with a fingernail. If the juice looks milky, the corn is ready. Use within one or two days. Or freeze by blanching the cobs for four minutes, putting them in icy water for four more, cutting off the kernels and storing in airtight freezer bags.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Earlivee (early), Honey & Cream (multicolored), Pearl White (white, drought-tolerant), Sundance.

Cucumber

Cucumis sativus

There's nothing like a refreshing cucumber salad on a hot summer day. Or a salad topped with low-calorie cucumber-yogurt dressing. Just don't remove the rind, because you'll lose this veggie's best stuff: fiber and vitamin A.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: It's best to sow seeds in the



garden 1/2 to 1 inch deep and 2 inches apart, two weeks after last frost. Thin to one seedling every 12 inches. For extended harvest, plant another crop in mid- or late summer.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to pick in 50 to 100 days, depending on variety. Harvest when the fruits are green and firm; smaller is better.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Burpless, Caroline (pickling), Fanfare and Salad Bush (compact bush), Sweet Success.

Eggplant

Solanum melongena

Baba ganoush, that tasty Middle Eastern dip made of pureed eggplant, tahini, garlic and olive oil, is just one of many delicious dishes you can make with these versatile



veggies. Bonus points: They're pretty enough to serve as ornamentals in containers.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: It's best to use transplants spaced 18 to 24 inches apart, with 30 to 36 inches between rows.

HARVEST TIPS: Matures in 50 to 80 days, depending on the variety. Pick fruits when they're 6 to 8 inches long and still shiny, and keep their green "hats" on. Also use the thumb test: Gently press the flesh. If it rebounds, you're good to go. If it's still hard, the fruit isn't ready. If it's mushy, you're too late. Eggplants spoil quickly, so don't wait long to cook them.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Black Bell, Ghostbuster (white), Slim Jim (container gardens), Easter Egg (yellow ornamental).

Garlic

Allium sativum

Greek athletes gobbled garlic before Olympic games to boost their stamina. They knew what modern science



has confirmed: Garlic is as healthful as its aroma is pungent.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Autumn planting allows the cloves time to develop roots before winter, which then accelerates growth in spring. Place cloves 2 to 3 inches deep and 3 to 5 inches apart, with the tips pointing up. Cover the soil with several inches of mulch. You may see green shoots before winter; that's okay. Weed around the bulbs carefully in spring, and water regularly.

HARVEST TIPS: When two-thirds of the tops are dried out, probably in July or August, dig around the bulbs and remove them. Don't pull on the stems. String plants together and hang them to dry. Whole bulbs will keep for months in cool, dry storage.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Artichoke, Silverskin.



top 10 herbs

Say hi to herb(s), a cost-conscious kitchen gardener’s best friend.

Growing a nutritious herb garden outside your kitchen door is a true delight—sort of like finding a stylist who gets your hair color just right on the first visit. Raising herbs is fairly easy, and many varieties double as beautiful ornamentals that add color and texture to gardens. Growing herbs save you money, too. And you can’t put a dollar value on the flavor you’ll savor when you add fresh-picked herbs to homemade recipes. Here’s the 411 on our top 10 favorite herbs.



veggie bite
For long-term storage, keep herbs in airtight containers made of dark glass, which shields them from damaging light. Canning jars with glass lids held by metal clamps work great.



BASIL
Want to add zest to pasta sauces? Just leaf it to basil. There are more than 30 varieties of this herb, but sweet basil is the most common. Space plants 1 foot apart; they’ll grow 1 to 2 feet high. To promote bushiness, pinch off growing tips and blooms as they appear. Consider colorful varieties, such as Purple Ruffles.



BAY
Bay leaves actually come from a shrub that’s a perennial in warmer climates. It’s a fussy plant, so most gardeners buy a small plant and grow it indoors. It reaches 5 or 6 feet in height if kept pruned. Warning: Be sure you buy a culinary bay tree, as other relatives produce toxic leaves.



CHIVE
Versatility, thy name is chive. Stir it into soups and sauces; whip it with butter, cream cheese, sour cream and dips; or sprinkle it on potatoes and omelets. Chive is a kissing cousin of onions, but tastes slightly sweeter and milder. They grow 10 to 15 inches tall, with bright blossoms and leaves



CILANTRO
Strongly associated with Mexican food, cilantro also is a popular ingredient in Middle Eastern, Indian, South American and Asian cuisines. And talk about getting a lot of bang for your buck—its seeds also produce the spice coriander. Cilantro grows 1 to 3 feet tall. For a continuous harvest, plant successive crops every 2 to 4 weeks.



DILL
A member of the carrot family, dill is well known as a pickling ingredient. But its seeds and leaves also taste great in breads, dips, salads and soups. It grows best when sown directly in soil. Common dill grows to about 3 feet tall, but is leggy enough to warrant planting in a location protected from wind.



OREGANO
This drought-tolerant Mediterranean herb is a hardy perennial that typically grows about a foot tall. It’s the ultimate low-maintenance herb, as it requires little watering. In fact, you don’t even have to cover the seeds with dirt; just mist them and watch ’em grow. To maximize flavor and keep plants compact, pinch off blooms as they appear.



PARSLEY
Popular as a garnish, this member of the carrot family also enhances the flavor of meats, salads and soups. The plants are slowpokes when it comes to germinating, so it helps to soak the seeds overnight before planting. Mature parsley will reach 10 to 18 inches in height and spread 6 to 9 inches.



ROSEMARY
This hardy, aromatic herb is packed with medicinal powers. The scent of its oil enhances memory, and the herb is a powerful antioxidant that reduces the risk of blood clots, cancer, heart attacks and strokes. It’s also a crowd-pleaser when roasted with chicken, fish, lamb and pork. Grows up to 3 feet tall.



SAGE
Sage adds color, texture and fragrance to gardens—as well as flavor to pizza, pasta, meats and breads. Most types of culinary sage feature purplish-blue flowers and fuzzy leaves that range from gray-green to variegated colors. Plants grow up to 2½ feet tall and wide. Pinched for space? One plant is probably plenty.



THYME
Make time to grow thyme. This aromatic herb complements everything from tomato sauces and marinades to vegetables and jellies. It also doubles as an eye-pleasing, 6- to 10-inch-high ground cover. Better yet, this woody perennial doesn’t demand much attention at all, especially when it comes to watering. In fact, too much water reduces its flavor.

Lettuce

Lactuca sativa

Versatile lettuce is easy to grow, yields a bumper crop in small spaces and is largely pest- and disease-resistant. Plus, the yellow, bronze, pink and cherry-red varieties make great ornamentals—and colorful salads. Dig in!

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Plant seeds ¼ to ½ inch deep and 2 inches apart in fertile, well-draining soil, then thin to 12 inches apart. Plant seeds outdoors right after the last frost.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to pick in 40 to 85 days. Use quickly; it doesn't keep long.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Sweet Spanish and Bermuda Green Ice (looseleaf), Buttercrunch (Bibb or Boston), Iceberg, Little Caesar (romaine).

Onions

Allium cepa

A garden without onions? It's enough to make you cry. Sweet or sharp, onions lend pizzazz to everything from stews to salads. And what's finer than a slice of raw onion on a fresh-off-the-grill burger?

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Gardeners

typically get best results from sets—small bulbs less than 1 inch in diameter. Onions thrive in cooler weather, so plant sets in early spring, about 1 inch deep and 1 inch apart for green onions and 2 to 4 inches apart for slicing onions. Space rows 12 to 18 inches apart.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to harvest in 100 to 120 days. Pull green onions when the tops are 6 inches tall. For larger onions, harvest when the tops fall over. Let the onions lie on the ground for a day to dry. Put them in a box for a few weeks in a sheltered spot, then bring them inside and store in a cool, dry place.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Sweet Spanish and Bermuda (yellow and white), Vidalia Sweet, Walla Walla Sweet and Red Baron.

Pea

Lathyrus odoratus

There are two basic kinds of peas: garden peas, which require shelling, and snow or sugar peas, which have edible pods. No matter which you prefer, eat 'em with gusto, as these frost-hardy gems are an excellent source of iron, protein (8 grams per serving), vitamin C, and cholesterol-reducing soluble fiber.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Peas thrive in cooler weather, so plant them earlier than other veggies. Sow seeds 1 to



2 inches deep and 4 inches apart, allowing 18 inches between rows. Bush varieties require less room.

HARVEST TIPS: Peas mature in 54 to 72 days, depending on the variety. Harvest when the seeds are visible, but before they get too big. Pick regularly to encourage continued production. To freeze, blanch shelled pea or pods 1 pound at a time (two minutes for shelled and five minutes for pods), then soak in icy water for 5 minutes. Drain and freeze for up to a year in airtight, quart-size freezer bags.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Daybreak (early), Wando (summer), Dwarf Gray Sugar, Snowflake (high-yield sugar).

Pepper

Capsicum annuum

From crisp, colorful bell peppers to molten-lava-in-your-mouth jalapenos, these low-calorie veggies add color and zest to recipes. Plus, bells are chock-full of vitamins A, C and K, and chilies contain capsaicin, which fights inflammations and arthritis pain.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.



Potato

Solanum tuberosum

Mashed, baked, grilled or fried, potatoes are a staple for balanced, healthy meals. And they're easier to grow than you might expect—and packed with fiber, minerals and nutrients. Just watch the butter and sour cream.

HARDINESS: Annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: In March or April, place either whole small potatoes or small chunks with at least one "eye" about 1 foot apart in a 1- to 4-inch-deep trench, with rows spaced 2 feet apart. Late-maturing varieties store better. When nubs emerge, cover with a ridge of soil.

HARVEST TIPS: Gently dig up tubers after the vines die; earlier for "new" potatoes. Store in a cool, dark place with good air circulation. If they sprout eyes, just cut them out.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Norland (early, red skin), Pontiac (red skin, summer harvest), Katahdin (late-season).

Pumpkin

Curcubita spp.

Talk about a triple threat: Toasted pumpkin seeds are a tasty toasted snack, the flesh makes for great pies and the rinds offer a canvas for Halloween artwork. Smaller varieties are now available, so carve out some space and let 'em grow.

HARDINESS: Annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Plant four or five seeds 1 inch deep in an 18-inch-high mound of soil. Keep hills 5 feet apart for vining pumpkins and 3 to 4 feet for semi-vining types. After the seeds sprout, thin to the healthiest two or three seedlings.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to harvest in 100 to 110 days. Pick when they're a deep, solid orange color (for most varieties) and the rind is hard, usually late September or early October. Leave a 3-to-4-inch stem, which helps the



fruit keep longer.

RECOMMENDATIONS: New England Pie (cooking), Sweetie Pie (white miniature), Connecticut Field (large carving), Mammoth Gold (jumbo carving).

Radish

Raphanus sativus

Don't believe good things come in small packages? Radishes are nutritional powerhouses, full of copper, iron, manganese, potassium and zinc, plus vitamins C and K. And talk about a burst of flavor. Zing!

HARDINESS: Annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Plant seeds ¼ to ½ inch deep; thin

seedlings to 1 inch apart (2 to 4 inches for winter radishes). In summer, sow a crop of winter radishes, which take longer to mature and last longer in storage.

HARVEST TIPS: Matures in 22 to 28 days; 52 to 70 days for winter varieties. Harvest when the roots are less than 1 inch in diameter, larger for winter varieties. Radishes don't keep very long, except for winter varieties, which store well for several months if kept cool and moist.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Champion, Easter Egg (various colors), Snow Belle (white), icicle (white, narrow and tapered), China Rose and Tama Hybrid (white, winter).



veggie bite

If you grow pumpkins for cooking or baking, here's a rule of thumb: 1 pound of pumpkin flesh equals about 1 cup of cooked pumpkin.

top 12 tomato tips

It's no contest: The tomato—or "tomahto," if you prefer—is the most popular veggie grown in the United States. With so many varieties available, it's no wonder more than 35 million gardeners will plant tomatoes this growing season.

It's easy to join their ranks and make your backyard the neighborhood Tomatoville. Whether you prefer a beautiful beefsteak or a cheery cherry, you'll soon be growing the tastiest tomatoes on the block. Just follow these tips, then rustle up some recipes for marinara sauce, soup, chutney and the like. Those tomatoes will on the vine before you know it.

1. START WITH SEEDS.

Buying transplants is the easiest way to grow tomatoes. But if you really want to explore the many distinctive varieties available, you're better off starting seeds indoors.

Six to eight weeks before the last spring frost, drop seeds into pots filled with soil, peat moss and vermiculite. When the seedlings sprout two sets of leaves, transplant them into bigger containers.

2. SEEK THE HEAT.

As seedlings grow, they need lots of light and heat. Put them in a sunny window, or place an artificial light 4 to 6 inches above the seedlings to encourage stout stems.

To prepare seedlings for planting, set them outside for a few hours daily in early spring. When temperatures stay above 55, it's time to plant.

3. SHOW YOUR SUPPORT.

Keep your tomatoes clean and disease-free by supporting them with stakes, trellises or cages.

Like most heirloom varieties, vining (also known as "indeterminate") tomatoes will continue to grow until killed by frost. Use at least a 5-to-8-foot-tall cage or a trellis to keep them off the ground.

Bush varieties (also known as "determinate" tomatoes), such as Roma, are great in any garden. But they're especially good choices for containers or small gardens

because of their size. Use small stakes or tomato cages to support them.

4. KNOW YOUR DIRT.

Tomatoes grow well in soils with a slightly acidic pH level of 5.8 to 7, but they adapt nicely to slightly alkaline soils, too. If your soil is sandy or claylike, work in 2 to 3 inches of compost.

Have your soil tested and follow the recommendations for best results. Avoid nitrogen-heavy fertilizers that produce lots of leaves and little fruit.

5. QUENCH THEIR THIRST.

The best thing you can do for tomatoes is water them consistently. This can prevent leaf-end roll, blossom-end rot and something known as "cat facing" — misshapen cracks that appear on the stem end of the fruit.

Make sure your tomatoes get at least an inch of water a week. Watering early in the morning helps prevent disease and leaf burn. And don't water the leaves.

6. MULCH 'EM.

Mulch keeps plants moist, protects low-growing tomatoes from resting on the ground and helps prevent soil from back-splashing onto the foliage after a soaking, which can cause disease. It also controls weeds and keeps the soil cool.

Use organic mulches, such as leaves, hay or herbicide-free grass clippings. As these materials break down, they enrich the soil and improve its structure.

7. DON'T GET SUCKERED.

Keep removing suckers, those little shoots that appear in the crotch between the stem and branch. Suckers dilute the flow of energy, so removing them will give you fewer but earlier fruits. But be careful not to remove too many leaves, which produce the nutrients that makes tomatoes delicious.



title: TRY AN OLD TOMATO THIS YEAR

AMISH PASTE: An indeterminate heirloom variety, this plant produces juicy red 6-to-8-ounce fruits. They're very meaty, mildly tart and great for sauces or eating straight off the vine. Matures 85 days from transplanting.

GREEN ZEBRA: This variety isn't the biggest of the crop, but it will make quite an impression in a mixed salad. The fruit is green with light-green stripes and has a light citrus flavor. Matures 75 to 80 days from transplanting.

POWERS HEIRLOOM: More than 100 years old, this determinate variety is certified organic. It produces heavy yields of 3-to-5-ounce yellow paste tomatoes with great flavor. Matures 85 to 90 days from transplanting.

ITALIAN HEIRLOOM: One of the most productive varieties around, this plant produces fruits that weigh more than pound each. They're very flavorful, easy to peel and ideal for both slicing and canning. Matures 70 to 80 days from transplanting.

8. BEAT DISEASE.

Prevent blight, a common fungal disease, by mulching, rotating plants, and staking or trellising.

9. THINK OUTSIDE THE VEGGIE BED.

No room for a big vegetable garden? Try growing tomatoes in your flower beds instead. The colorful fruits are a pretty addition to any landscape.

10. FOCUS YOUR ENERGY.

About a month before the first frost, pluck new flower clusters off tomato plants to direct energy into the fruits already set on the vine.

At room temperature, fully ripe tomatoes keep

their flavor for up to two days. To speed the ripening process, put tomatoes in a paper bag with an apple. The ethylene gas released by the fruit helps your tomatoes ripen faster.

11. COOL IT.

Tomato growers are often rewarded with more than they — and family and friends — can eat. You can store ripe tomatoes at room temperature for a few days. To keep them longer, store in a dry, fairly cool location. But make sure your storage space isn't too cold: When the temperature drops below 55, tomatoes start to lose their flavor.

A rule of thumb says you'll need two tomato

plants for every tomato eater in your household. But if you plan on canning, four per person is a better bet.

12. TRY HEIRLOOMS.

Heirloom varieties aren't hard to grow or more susceptible to disease. They're just great-tasting tomatoes.

Save and refrigerate the seeds of heirlooms until next year. They will maintain their flavor and appearance if you start with seeds collected from a mature plant in your garden. Popular heirlooms include Cherokee Purple, Red Brandywine and Black Krim. These may be available as seed and as small plants.



With this advice, you'll be harvesting tomatoes quicker than you can say "BLT."



Spinach

Spinacia oleracea

Science has confirmed what Popeye knew in his gut: Spinach is good for you. Along with mega-doses of vitamins A and K, plus folate, manganese, magnesium and iron, spinach has flavonoids that can help fight certain cancers. Even Bluto would approve.

HARDINESS: Grown as an annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: Spinach thrives in cooler weather, so plant seeds in early spring. Sow about a dozen seeds per foot about ½ inch deep, with about 1 foot between rows. Thin to 2 to 4 inches apart when seedlings are 1 inch tall. For an extended harvest, plant successive batches for several more weeks.

HARVEST TIPS: Matures in 39 to 48 days, depending on variety. Cut off leaves at ground level when they reach desired size; younger leaves taste better.

When seed stalks form, harvest the rest of the crop.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Bloomsdale Long Standing (crinkly leaves), Indian Summer and Vienna (hybrid savoy, blight-resistant), Giant Nobel (plain leaf).

Squash (summer)

Cucurbita pepo

Summer squash—which include crookneck, zucchini, straightneck and scallopini—is a serious ally for dieters and health-minded cooks. Steamed, grilled, fried or baked in a casserole, squash delivers the nutritional goods.

HARDINESS: Annual.

PLANTING ADVICE: In well-draining soil, sow four or five seeds in a 1-inch-tall hill. When seedlings reach 2 or 3 inches tall, thin to two healthy seedlings per hill.

HARVEST TIPS: Pick all varieties when they're immature, or they grow tough and woody.

Pick long, narrow varieties before they're 2 inches in diameter and are 6 to 8 inches long; 3 to 4 inches in diameter for pattypan and scallopini varieties.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Sundance (crookneck), Aristocrat (zucchini), Goldbar (straightneck), Peter Pan (scallopini).

Watermelon

Citrullus lanatus

What's better at a summer barbecue than a big slab of watermelon so juicy it drips down your chin? This succulent fruit is also full of lycopene, a natural plant chemical that has been proven to fight heart disease and some cancers.

HARDINESS: Annual.

PLANTING

ADVICE: Start seeds indoors about 3 weeks before you set them outdoors, or plant three seeds 1 inch deep in 2-foot-high mounds of soil and compost. Mounds should be 6 to 8 feet apart. In northern climates, transplants and early-maturing varieties work better. Water liberally for three or four weeks, then cut back when plants get established.

HARVEST TIPS: Ready to pick in 70 to 85 days, when the curly tendrils on the stem turn brown and dry, or the underside turns from light green to a creamy yellow.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Sugar Baby (dwarf fruits, early harvest), Crimson Sweet, Moon and Stars (decorative rind), Queen of Hearts (seedless).

veggie bite

It may seem counterintuitive, but don't overwater watermelons. Too much reduces the sugar in the fruit, which decreases the sweetness.

