

Growing Vegetables

A guide to growing excellent root, vine, & leafy vegetables



At a Glance

Leafy vegetables like spinach and Swiss chard enjoy rich soil, temperatures above 40°, 1-1/2 inches of water per week, and organic mulch like dry grass clippings.

Root vegetables, such as beets and carrots, enjoy rich, well-drained soil, consistent moisture, temperatures above 40° F, and organic mulch.

Vine crops prefer well-drained soil high in organic matter, 1-1/2 inches of water per week, temperatures above 55° F, and organic mulch.

Planting Leafy Vegetables

Leafy vegetables love rich soil high in organic matter. Use organic mulch, like dry grass clippings, to reduce summer soil temperatures, conserve moisture, and control weeds.

Hardy vegetables, like lettuce and spinach, grow best with daytime temperatures as low as 40° F and may survive a frost.

Semi-Hardy vegetables, like Swiss chard, will need minimum temperatures of 40 to 50°, but are less frost-tolerant.

Keep soil moist with 1-1/2 inches of water per week (including rain). If the crop dries out, it will become tough and stringy.

Thin the crop to reduce competition for nutrients.

Harvesting Leafy Vegetables

Harvest collards, Swiss chard, and lettuce by twisting the outer leaves. The center will regrow. These can be harvested until the ground freezes.

Harvest lettuce heads by cutting away with a sharp knife from the stalk while the head is still firm. Make a clean cut below the head through the stem.

Harvest spinach by cutting the whole plant at the base, or by picking one layer at a time and giving the inner layers more time to develop.

Planting Root Vegetables

Root crops need a rich, well-drained soil high in aged organic matter. Use an organic mulch to cool the soil in summer, stabilize soil moisture, and control weeds. Consistent soil moisture is a must.

Hardy vegetables like radishes, turnips, beets, and carrots require daytime temperatures no lower than 40°, but may survive a frosty nip. Semi-hardy vegetables like potatoes grow with minimum temperatures of 40-50°, but are less tolerant of frost.

Harvesting Root Vegetables

Carrots

To harvest carrots, loosen the soil around the plants before digging. They will retain their quality in the ground for about three weeks after reaching their recommended size.

Beets

Most species of beets require 50–70 days on average to reach maturity, but they can be harvested at any time you see fit. Don't allow the greens (also edible) to grow above 6 inches before harvesting. Fresh beets can be stored in the refrigerator for 5–7 days.

Radishes

Hot weather, hot soil, and/or plants that remain in the ground past maturity can cause hot or pithy radishes. Thin plants as soon as they pop through the ground. For tender young root crops, replant in mid-summer for a fall harvest.

Do not leave radishes in the ground long after mature stage as their condition will deteriorate quickly.

Winter Storage

Some varieties of carrots store well in garden soil or in a root cellar for year-round use. Root vegetables can be left in the ground undisturbed where planted and covered with straw or other organic material.



Leafy Vegetables

Plant these when temperatures are consistently above 40° F



Root Vegetables

Plant these when temperatures are consistently above 40° F



Vining Vegetables

Plant these when temperatures are consistently above 55° F

Planting Vining Vegetables

Vine crops thrive in well-drained soils high in organic matter. Yearly applications of compost will likely supply needed nutrients.

Wait to plant until nighttime temperatures are consistently above 55° F. Protect tender plants from cold wind.

Direct seeding is reported to give higher yields.

Vine crops have male and female flowers. Male flowers develop first, and generally predominate. Young fruits that are not pollinated will abort. When bee activity is limited, you can increase yield by hand pollination. Pick a male flower, remove petals, and touch the center of the female flowers with the male flower. This is best done in the morning.

Stress caused by inadequate or inconsistent moisture, poor soil, and weather extremes can reduce flowering and lead to aborted fruit.

Harvesting Vining Vegetables

Harvest regular slicing cucumbers when they reach about 6 to 8 inches. Harvest dills at 4 to 6 inches, and pickles at 2 inches.

Harvest muskmelons (cantaloupe) when color changes from green to white or yellow, and aroma develops. Ripe melon easily separates from its stem.

Harvest summer squash while wearing gloves, as some plant stems have thorns. Cut yellow squash at 5–6 inches, patty pan at 3 inches, zucchini at 6–8 inches.

Winter squash and pumpkins will become sweeter as they mature. Cut after a light frost (28–31°) when richly colored and the skin is tough enough to resist piercing with a thumbnail. Cut the stem at 2 inches. Cure in-field for 7–10 days, covering in the evening if frost is expected. Before storing, wash with a solution of 1 part bleach to 10 parts water to help prevent mold.

Watermelons are ready to harvest when the tendril next to the stem end has dried. The ground-spot will be yellow and a thump with your knuckle will bring a dull thud. Winter melons like casaba, crenshaw, and honeydew, are ready to harvest when colorful and aromatic. These can be stored indoors for a few weeks.