

Gardening for Success

Resource Sheet



Gardening in Colorado requires careful attention to seasonal variations, correct watering techniques and soil preparation. With its 300 plus days of sunshine, disease problems are not as prevalent as in regions receiving high amounts of rainfall. Our semi-arid, 'Mile-High' altitude allows vegetables and flowers to mature quickly, with fruiting varieties, such as tomatoes, peppers and squash thriving in abundant light. For all gardeners, a little knowledge about basic gardening techniques and Colorado conditions can lead to a well managed, beautiful organic garden, with rich, productive soil and a diverse harvest.

Know When to Plant

Last spring frost is around May 15th, first fall frost is around October 5th. Cool season crops, which can be planted as soon as the soil can be prepared (usually late March), include: spinach, onion sets, asparagus crowns, cilantro, parsley, potatoes, radishes, leaf lettuces, peas, green onions, collards and mustard greens. A few weeks later (mid-late April), plant carrot seeds and transplants of cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower. The first week in May seeds of summer (e.g. zucchini and crookneck) and winter squash, pumpkins, corn, sweet basil, beans, cucumbers, and melons can be planted. Transplants of tomatoes are usually planted the second week in May, while heat-loving peppers and eggplants are best planted the third week in May. Peas can be replanted the end of July for a fall crop. Spinach, lettuce and radishes can be replanted in mid-August for a fall crop.

Prepare Soil with Adequate Organic Material

Most Colorado soil is of a heavy clay type, which needs to have at least 2 inches of compost dug into the top 3 – 4 inches of soil. Moisten soil a few days before digging and do not work the soil when it is wet, as it will dry like adobe brick. Dig with a shovel or garden fork, turning over small clumps of soil at least 6 inches down, breaking up clumps with the shovel to produce fine particles. Spread compost on top of the loosened soil, again mixing it into the top several inches of clay soil (where most of the root growth occurs).

Plant Only What You Like and Can Care For

Do not become overwhelmed with glossy pictures of fabulous vegetables shown in seed catalogs. Plan enough space for cool, warm and hot season vegetables and herbs. Utilize 'succession planting' for fast-maturing veggies such as spinach, lettuce and peas. Plant small quantities of the above crops, at 1 – 2 week intervals, to insure a staggered harvest. Interplant shade-loving veggies, such as lettuce, with taller peas. The peas will help shade the lettuce and also provide some of the nitrogen needed by the salad green. Leave enough space to replant spring crops in mid-August, for a fall harvest. Thin all direct seeded crops (especially carrots, radish and beets) to allow room for root development.

Harden Off All Greenhouse Transplants

Take a week to expose all transplants to outdoor growing conditions. Take them outside in a semi-shaded area for 1 hour the first day and then bring them back inside. Each day increase their time outside by 1 – 2 hours. By the end of the week transplants should be able to withstand strong winds and ultraviolet exposure.

Water Gently at Root Level

Newly planted seeds need daily watering, with uniform moisture applied slowly and evenly. Avoid overhead watering of tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, squash, pumpkins and melons, as diseases can be spread with such a technique. To find out if plants need water, insert a branch or your finger several inches into the soil, if moist soil adheres to your measuring device, plants do not need water.

Cultivate the Soil Around All Plants Once a Week

Lightly scratching the soil before watering is an excellent way to keep the weed population in check (weeds can be left directly on the soil as a mulch) and open up air channels for deeper infiltration of water. A crumbly, loose soil also allows roots to reach down further for water.

Mulch All Areas

Use straw or dried pesticide-free grass clippings as mulch around all crops. A light covering on all bare soil provides a cooler root-growing environment, prevents erosion and conserves water.

Harvest Frequently

Overgrown produce becomes a magnet for disease and insect infestation. Harvest when veggies are small and skins are shiny (especially noticeable in eggplants). As plants slow in production, remove the crop and plant a different variety. Early peas can be followed by squash, spinach or lettuce followed by beans.

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