

Deciding What to Plant in Your Garden

One of the first decisions a gardener needs to make is what crops to grow. This is fun, but it's also serious business. Unfortunately, we can't grow everything we might like in a small, backyard garden or in a community garden plot. Your first consideration should be what you and your family like to eat. Other important factors to think about are the value of the crop and its nutrition.

Value and Nutrition

Vegetable value can be due to either a high price per pound or a high yield of produce. Vegetables highest in value for the space they take up are:

1. Tomatoes, grown up supports to save space
2. Rhubarb
3. Green bunching onions
4. Leaf lettuce
5. Turnips, for greens and roots
6. Summer squash: zucchini, scallop and yellow types
7. Asparagus
8. Edible podded peas
9. Onion bulbs for storage
10. Beans, pole or runner types (green or wax pod)
11. Beets, grown for green tops and roots
12. Beans, bush (green or wax pod)
13. Carrots
14. Cucumbers, grown up supports to save space
15. Peppers, sweet or bell
16. Broccoli
17. Kohlrabi
18. Swiss chard
19. Mustard greens
20. Spinach

At the bottom of the list are potatoes, Brussels sprouts, celery, corn, winter squash and melons. Other veggies are in between.

Nutrition

People have many reasons for gardening. Whatever the primary motivation, nutrition should be at least a secondary one. Unfortunately, most gardeners seem to give little thought to nutrition. A few years ago, a Gallup poll done for the National Gardening Association showed that none of the ten most popular vegetables grown by American gardeners are among the ten most nutritious ones they could grow.

Actually, how you define "most nutritious" is up for debate. American Health magazine came up with their rating after looking at concentrations of protein, calcium, iron, vitamin A, vitamin C, potassium, phosphorous, thiamin, riboflavin and niacin. The Center for Science in the Public Interest created a score for each vegetable by adding up the percent of the RDA (recommended daily allowance) for six nutrients: vitamins A and C, folate, iron, copper and calcium. Vegetables are an important source of fiber, and they felt fiber should influence the ratings. There is no RDA for fiber, so they assigned it one. See both lists below.

American Health Magazine

1. Collard greens
2. Shelled beans (such as limas)
3. Peas
4. Spinach
5. Sweet potatoes

6. Turnip greens
7. Winter squash
8. Broccoli
9. Kale
10. Brussels sprouts
11. Mustard greens
12. Swiss chard
13. Tomatoes

14. Corn
15. Beet greens
16. Potatoes
17. Carrots and Parsnips
18. Summer squash
19. Cauliflower
20. Green beans

Center for Science in the Public Interest

1. Sweet potatoes
2. Carrots
3. Spinach
4. Collards
5. Red bell pepper
6. Kale

7. Broccoli
8. Brussels sprouts
9. Potatoes
10. Winter squash
11. Swiss chard
12. Snow peas
13. Mustard greens
14. Kohlrabi

15. Cauliflower
16. Asparagus
17. Green bell pepper
18. Peas
19. Romaine
20. Endive

The lists are very different, but there are some similarities. Look at all the leafy greens on both lists. Both lists contain those orange, vitamin A powerhouses - sweet potatoes, carrots, and winter squash. Don't worry too much about exactly where a vegetable placed on the list. After all, these are all winners. Choose varieties of these vegetables developed to grow well in our area. In some cases, the wrong variety can give you poor results, even if you do everything else right.

Are you growing crops that aren't on these lists? Tomatoes, peppers and green beans, the top three most popular garden vegetables, each made only one of the lists. Cucumbers, onions and lettuce, the next three most popular crops, aren't here at all. Neither are radishes, beets and turnip roots, eggplant, or celery.

Advice for Beginners

Don't try to grow more than eight vegetables in your first garden. With experience, a couple more can be added each year as gardening skill and confidence grows. New gardeners may want to try the easiest vegetables and avoid the ones that are more difficult to grow here. The easy ones are mostly ones that are fairly quick to mature as well. Fast-growing vegetables are good choices when gardening with children, who often don't have a lot of patience.