

Spring 2011

Gwinnett Extension News

Container vegetable gardening

By: Timothy Daly
Gwinnett County Extension Agent

Growing vegetables in containers is an easy alternative way to garden if you lack the space to grow vegetables in your yard. Container vegetable gardens can be placed just about anywhere as long as they receive at least eight hours of sunlight a day. They can be just as productive as growing vegetables in a traditional garden.

A wide range of vegetables can be grown in containers. Those that require minimal space are the best, especially "bush" or "dwarf" varieties. Tomatoes, peppers, beans, greens, radishes, and most herbs do well in containers. The larger growing vegetables will need to be planted in larger containers. Some of the taller growing vegetables will need to be staked.

A variety of containers can be used. They come in all shapes and sizes. Bushel baskets, drums, gallon cans, tubs, or wooden boxes can be used. Different materials, including wood, clay, and ceramic are used as containers. Whichever type is used, it needs to be large enough to support the vegetables at their mature size. Larger containers are easier to maintain and do not dry out quickly. The containers should have a few holes in the bottom for drainage.

Avoid using existing garden soil because it can become compacted in the container and not

drain properly. Also, it can be a source of diseases, insects, and weeds. The best medium for containers is soilless potting mixes. They provide adequate drainage but have sufficient water retention to keep the roots uniformly moist. Mix into the medium an all-purpose fertilizer, such as a 10-10-10, or a slow release fertilizer. Plant the seeds or transplants and then water in thoroughly.

The most important component of container gardening is ensuring the plants have adequate water. Since containers are above ground and the relative volume of soil is small, they dry out quickly. Check the containers every day to see if they need water. Apply water until it runs out of the drainage holes on the bottom. Make sure the water is cool before applying, particularly if the hose sits in the sun. Raise the containers off the ground by placing them on wooden blocks or bricks to improve drainage. Avoid getting the leaves wet to prevent the development of plant diseases.



Harvest the vegetables when they reach their mature size. At the end of the growing season, dispose of the old vegetable plants that are diseased. Compost the healthy ones.

Even if you have limited space, growing vegetables in containers can be quite rewarding. If properly cared for, they will provide a bountiful harvest.

In this issue:

Container vegetable gardening	1
Top five easiest plants for beginner gardeners	2
Canning and preserving the correct way	3
Staff Directory	4

"If you have a mind at peace, a heart that cannot harden, go find a door that opens wide upon a lovely garden."

Top five easiest plants for beginner gardeners

By: **Jamie Woodhead**

Student writer with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences

The possibilities for a new garden can seem endless, but choosing what to grow can make all the difference, especially for beginner gardeners.

University of Georgia horticulturalists **Bob Westerfield** and **George Boyhan** know what it takes to create a prosperous garden. They have created the following helpful hints and a list of the top five easiest plants for beginners:

Green beans: "A trick for green beans is to soak the seeds in a glass of water overnight and then plant them the next day," Westerfield said. "This speeds the germination process." Green beans are warm season vegetables that are more tolerant of cooler temperatures. Planting green beans early is not as problematic as it is with other vegetables. They also do not need a lot of fertilizer.

Radishes: "The absolute easiest plant to grow is a radish. They are practically bomb-proof," said Westerfield. It is the fastest developing vegetable, taking about 28 days to mature.

Eggplants: This vegetable can be grown in a tomato cage or staked. They are easy because they are seldom bothered by problems like insects. They are also extremely prolific. Ratooning is a technique that helps rejuvenate the plant and produce a second crop. To do it, Westerfield says to "cut back the plant eight to 10 inches from the ground,"

Peppers: Peppers need plenty of room to expand. They can handle light frost and cooler temperatures. Peppers are fun to grow because there are so many shapes and colors available. Colors range from dark green to chocolate and even a purple hue.



Tomatoes: Although Boyhan referred to tomatoes as "tried and true" and Westerfield noted they are the most popular vegetable, both say tomatoes can be quite problematic for beginner gardeners. Tomatoes are usually staked or caged and grown from transplants. Because they are tropical plants, tomatoes are susceptible to Georgia's humidity, rainfall and high heat. They are also quite disease-prone.

Lots of tomato varieties exist, but Westerfield says the easiest to grow is the cherry tomato. The fruit is the size of a cherry or grape and the plant is more forgiving in terms of diseases.

Gardening tools: Even after choosing the most appropriate plants, no garden can be successfully maintained without gardening tools. Essential tools include hand tools like a hand trowel and shovel, a hoe and tomato cages or stakes (if the plants call for them). "A mini tiller is handy, too, but if the garden is large, I suggest investing in a large tiller," Westerfield said. "It's worth its weight in gold."

Boyhan says the biggest problem home gardeners can face in the garden is weeds. "It is important to get out there and take care of the weeds when they are small, he said. "Do not let them get big."

Sunlight, soil, water, and fertilizer are vital to the success of a garden. Gardeners might not realize, however, that soil temperature is also crucial.

"The biggest key to growing vegetables is knowing the soil temperature and what plants work best at that temperature," said Westerfield. "You can use a soil thermometer or go to www.georgiaweather.net and find the soil temperature throughout all regions of Georgia."

For more information about home gardening, contact Timothy Daly, Gwinnett County Extension Agent, at 678.377.4010.

Canning and preserving the correct way

At the Extension office, we are often asked how to safely home can a food. We give people the following tips:

It is best to make sure the person canning foods at home uses recipes – and procedures -- from sources that can be trusted to know the science behind canning. These sources should know what kind of testing is needed to develop a canning recommendation for some recipes. Tested or scientifically evaluated processes can be found in the USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning (2009 is the latest version) or the University of Georgia's So Easy to Preserve book (the current version is the 5th edition), the National Center for Home Food Preservation web site, or books from major equipment and ingredient manufacturers, for example.

Because of their acidity, lower risk foods include fruit jams and jellies and whole fruits like peaches, cherries, plums, and cranberries, or cranberry sauce. The high sugar content of fruit jams, jellies and preserves add an extra measure of safety and barriers to even spoilage.

Low-acid vegetables and vegetable mixes are higher risk foods because if improperly processed, they could cause botulism. Botulism is a potentially deadly food poisoning. Improperly canned vegetables have caused botulism in just the past few years, as well as historically. If someone gives you a jar of their home canned vegetables, or soup mixes, it is extremely important to know they followed proper canning processes and procedures for preparing the food as well as proper operation of the pressure canner. There are no properly tested home canning processes we know to recommend for canning pestos, thickened stews or soups, creamed soups, and pumpkin or other vegetable butters.

Mixtures of acid and low-acid ingredients like in tomato-vegetable salsas, other vegetable salsas, and some pickled foods, are a potential risk for botulism, also. If the home canner processed them in boiling water; as if they are an acid food, then the ratio or proportion of acid to low-acid ingredients is very important. In addition, the style and thickness of the mixture, size of food pieces, and preparation steps can influence what the process time should be. It is best to use properly tested recipes and to not make up a canning process for your own recipe.

If the food looks suspicious, it would be better to toss it out than risk getting sick. Pieces of food should be covered with liquid with no discoloration or drying out at the top of the jar. In addition, there should not be unnatural discoloration in the food throughout the jar. Throw out anything with mold growing on it. Before opening the jar, look for signs of spoilage such as cloudy and/or bubbling liquid. Make sure the jar has a vacuum seal. When you open the jar, make sure there is not spurting of liquid indicating a lot of pressure inside the jar forcing it out. Also notice if there are unusual odors coming from the food in the jar.

However, there can be botulism toxin in sealed jars of low-acid foods without any visible signs or off-odors. It is critical to know how those foods were processed. We want people to be safe.

More about observing home canned foods for spoilage and storing can be found at: www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/store/store_home_canned.html.

For more information, please contact Ines Beltran, FACS Agent at Gwinnett Cooperative Extension, at 678.377.4010.





THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
 Colleges of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences & Family and Consumer Sciences

Gwinnett Cooperative Extension has served Gwinnett County citizens since 1919. We offer programs in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, Agriculture/Horticulture/Natural Resources, 4-H and Youth.

We are proud to be a part of Gwinnett County to assist with landscaping, soil testing, natural resources, promoting youth programs, teaching educational classes, and assisting consumers with unbiased, researched, informative information from the University of Georgia.

Learning *for* Life

The University of Georgia and Ft. Valley State College, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and counties of the state cooperating.

The **Cooperative Extension** offers educational programs, assistance and materials to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex, or disability. An Equal opportunity/affirmative action organization committed to a diverse work force.



Staff Directory

Visit our website at www.ugaextension.com/gwinnett

Extension Service	
Robert Brannen	Extension Director
Kitty Shepard	Office Manager
Sharon Cassidy	Receptionist
Ag/ Horticulture/ Natural Resource Department	
Timothy Daly	County Extension Agent
Kathy Parent	Ag Program Assistant
Marlene Gillman	Secretary
EFNEP Program	
Alma Rhoden	Program Assistant
4-H and Youth Programs	
Pam Schingoethe	4-H Agent
Janice Rogers	5th Grade Programs
Barbara Larson	6th Grade Programs
Family and Consumer Science Department	
Ines Beltran	County Agent/Radon Specialist
Tricia Smith	Secretary

The University of Georgia

College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences

gwinnettcounty • Cooperative Extension

750 South Perry Street, Suite 400 • Lawrenceville, GA 30046-4804

www.ugaextension.com/gwinnett • E-mail: uge1135@uga.edu

Phone: 678.377.4010 • Fax: 678.377.4030



The University of Georgia

College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences

Cooperative Extension

gwinnettcounty

750 South Perry Street, Suite 400

Lawrenceville, GA 30046-4804