



Grow Vegetables – Save Money

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Anyone who grocery shops on a regular basis has likely noticed a higher tally at the checkout counter. The latest consumer pricing analysis from the USDA is predicting a 1.3 percent increase in food prices. While we can't do much to lower the prices, one thing we can do is grow some of our own vegetables and herbs.

The investment in a small 100 square foot or so garden is not large, and one can be assured of healthy, high quality fresh produce. Vegetable gardeners can also control what, if any, types of pesticides are used on the plants. One source suggested that a \$70 investment in plants and seeds could produce a harvest worth \$600 or more over the growing season. Already having basic garden tools was probably taken for granted.



This lettuce was planted in a container. Photo by dmp2024

If yard space is limited or too shaded, consider renting a plot in a community garden, maybe teaming up with a friend trading garden chores for produce, or consider growing in window boxes and other containers. Even small areas provide opportunities to grow your own food. While a head of lettuce can cost \$2-3 dollars at the grocery store, for that same amount one can often pick up a cell-pack of 6 lettuce plants and grow them out in a large container, or 6 square feet or so of garden bed.

Starting plants directly in the garden by direct seeding can also offer considerable savings. I picked up a package of mixed lettuce variety seeds for \$3.25 that contains 500 seeds. This would enable one to grow multiple succession plantings for at least 2 or 3 years. If stored in a dark, cool, dry spot, many seeds last for at least 2 years if not longer.

Good candidates for direct sowing would be bush or pole beans, lettuce and other green leafy vegetables, radishes, peas, carrots, summer and winter squash, cucumbers, and corn. If they tickle your tastebuds, you can toss in turnips and parsnips.

Some vegetable varieties have greater cold tolerance than others so your peas, radishes, and many green leafy vegetables can usually be planted by the end of this month depending on the weather. In northern parts of Connecticut, it would be good if the soil warms and dries up a bit more.

Other types of vegetables are better to set in the garden as transplants, whether you grow them yourself or purchase them in cell-packs. The main reason for this is twofold. Certain plants, particularly in the brassica family, like cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower germinate fine in warm household temperatures but like to be grown cooler than many of us keep our houses and if left in those warm temperatures grow long and leggy instead of short and stocky. So, it's just easier to purchase healthy, stocky plants grown in a greenhouse to set in the garden or container, although the leggy ones usually catch up.

The second reason why some plants are better purchased as transplants is because vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and leeks have a long growing season – often 80 to 100 days from transplant until they produce harvestable crops. It makes more sense to plant 3- or 4-week-old transplants around Memorial Day so harvesting can start in late July or August. Contrarily, even though some winter squash and pumpkins might take 100 days or so to mature, I typically just direct seed them around Memorial Day because they seem to catch up with transplants, that usually experience a bit of transplant shock, pretty quickly so I don't feel like I am gaining much by purchasing transplants and more importantly, the particular varieties I prefer are not always available as plants.



This fabulous roma style tomato is an heirloom variety a friend brought from Italy. It makes a fantastic sauce! Photo by dmp2024

Regardless of whether you have a few containers to fill or a large garden, do some research before purchasing seeds or transplants. There are so many different cultivars available so look up variables like days to harvest, disease resistance, cold tolerance, productivity and more. Make notes on how they taste and any problems during the growing season.

When planning your edible plantings, also think about succession sowings, finding out what pest problems to be on the lookout for, last and first frost dates, mature size and space requirements, and days to harvest.

Feel free to contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center with questions on growing vegetables, herbs and other plants or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.