

News Article

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Managing Home Vegetable Production

Many people are in the middle of the vegetable growing season in their home gardens. As some things go right, and some things go wrong, perhaps you find yourself in troubleshooting mode. Dr. Rosie Lerner authored a recent update to Purdue Extension's "Home Gardener's Guide." It may provide some answers for this year, and help as you plan for next year. Homeowners may also find value in keeping a running journal of notes on the garden.

It all begins with the soil. If you have a new garden plot, or you are questioning what's going on with the soil in your garden, get a soil test. Choose a consistent time of year to provide multi-year comparisons. For many, fall is the preferable time to take soil samples. The results will help you be more prescriptive with pH adjustments and nutrient needs.

If you are tired dealing with heavy clay soils, try amending your garden soil this fall after garden clean up with some compost or other organic matter source. Compost will provide benefits with drainage, aid in loosening heavy clay soils, add some nutrients, and contribute to improved soil tilth. Tilth refers to the physical condition of soil as related to its ease of tillage, fitness as a seedbed, and its relative impedance to seedling emergence and root penetration.

Since we are well along in the growing season, I won't say much about seedbed preparation and planting operations, but the publication offers advice on these subjects. It also contains handy row spacing, planting depth, and planting time suggestions.

For most gardeners, the struggle now is dealing with the "daily grind" of the vegetable gardening season: weeds, watering and pest management.

Weeds can get out of hand in a hurry. Mechanical methods of weed control (hand-weeding, hoeing or roto-tilling) are often effective, but it requires persistence.

Mulches can help suppress weeds. Plastic mulches can be used at planting time, but gardeners can also use organic mulches, such as straw, crushed corn cobs, bark chips, and other materials. Mulching also conserves soil moisture and moderates hot summer temperatures.

For larger plantings of specific vegetables, herbicides may be used for weed control. But, they are usually not very feasible for the smaller home garden.

Watering is a must for most vegetable gardens. Hopefully, when you planned your garden plot, you located it close to a water source. Otherwise, watering will be a real chore. If we don't get 1 to 1½

inches of rain per week, supplemental water is needed. If we haven't had rain, a deep watering once every several days is much better than frequent light, shallow waterings because roots go where the water is. If they stay close to the soil surface, as they would with frequent shallow waterings, they are more susceptible to drought damage. Watering methods that avoid getting leaf tissue wet, such as soaker hoses or drip irrigation, are generally preferred to overhead watering because wet leaf tissue for longer periods are more susceptible to diseases. If overhead watering is what you have, do so early in the morning so that leaf tissue dries by mid-morning.

Pest management always begins with scouting, so inspect plants daily. Most of the time, you are out of luck if you notice insects or diseases already heavily infesting garden plants. So, you need to catch them early. Identify the exact problem first, then select a management strategy. Sprays or dusts are available for pest control, but be sure to read and follow the label directions.

Keep in mind that some insecticides will be harmful to bees, so choose a product with low toxicity to bees if possible. If necessary, avoid applying insecticides during bloom times and during most daytime hours. For bees, the safest time to apply insecticides is right after sundown.

Disease control strategies include selecting disease-resistant cultivars, rotating crops to different locations each year, and removing all plant debris in the fall. During the growing season, most available fungicides protect the crop from further infection rather than curing the part that is sick. This is another reason to inspect and catch the very first signs of disease.

For more detailed advice, access the revamped Purdue Extension publication, "Home Gardener's Guide," by B. Rosie Lerner, available at: www.edustore.purdue.edu.