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Toronto Master Gardeners

Growing vegetables in containers:

- almost any vegetable can be grown in a container but the most popular choices are: beans, cucumber eggplant, green onions, leafy greens, peppers, potatoes, radishes, summer squash, tomatoes
- almost anything can be used as a container but
 - container must have enough depth and width for root system of vegetable
 - container must have drainage
 - container cannot have contained a toxic substance in its previous life
- use a soilless mix that is a blend containing at least 30% compost or composted manure as well as peat moss (or alternative) and some sand/vermiculite/perlite. Do not use garden soil, top soil or triple mix in a container – these products will be too compacted. Start with fresh growing medium each season.
- regularly watering required – water at the base of the plant -water deeply but check the need for water by inserting your finger about 2 cm down into the growing medium.
- feed your container grown vegetables because frequent watering will leach the nutrients out of the growing medium. Feed with an organic fish or seaweed based liquid fertilizer every two weeks. Top dress with compost once a month. Carrots and parsnips should only receive the compost. Radishes do not need to be fed.

Terms to know:

1. Days to maturity – from seed means the number of days from the time the seed germinates until the fruit is mature. On a seedling, the number of days from when the seedling is ready to put in the garden until the fruit is mature. Not exact. Find on seed packet.
2. Hardening off – seedlings accustomed to the indoors must be gradually exposed to the outdoor elements before being transplanted into the garden – starting with an hour the first day and increasing length of time each day for about a week
3. Critical Growth Period – most vegetable plants have a time where the temperature or consistent moisture is extremely critical.
4. Crop rotation – means that you do not plant your crop in the same place every year. Move your crops around to prevent a build-up of disease in the soil and even out nutrient absorption.

Beans:

- Sow seed directly in garden in soil that is at least 18C.
- Garden grown beans do not need additional feeding
- Critical Growth Period: plant in flower and pods forming

Cucumbers:

- Start indoors 4 weeks before date you want to plant in garden or purchase seedlings and transplant seedlings into garden in late May/early June
- Sow seed directly in garden when soil is warm
- Temperatures under 10C harmful to cucumber seedlings and plants
- Pollinators needed so include flowering herbs and annuals in the vegetable garden
- Critical Growth Period: as plants flower and form fruit
- Harvest pickling cucumbers at 4-6 cm, slicing cucumbers at 12-16 cm depending on variety and European cucumbers at 20 cm.

Leafy greens:

- Mostly early season (April/May) or sow seed in August for late season crops
- Spinach can be sown when soil is 4C
- Lettuces and Swiss Chard need soil at 7C+

Onions:

- Green onions can be sown directly in garden – usually in April – sow seed in garden every two weeks for continuous harvest
- Cooking onions – start seed indoors in early February – sow transplants and sets in garden 4 weeks before last frost date
- Sets should be planted with tops level with top of soil
- Soil consistently moist to 12 cm depth
- Cooking onions mature when leaves bend over – stop watering
- Cure for one week in sunny spot before storing

Garlic:

- Hard neck and soft neck varieties – soft neck can be braided
- Plant in the fall – full sun - loose, crumbly soil – 6 cm deep and 6 cm apart
- Mulch with straw or chopped leaves for winter – remove mulch when daffodils are 5 cm tall
- Don't plant garlic from the grocery store
- Bulbs ready for harvest when bottom half of leaves begins to turn yellow
- For storage – cure for 2-3 weeks in dry, shaded place with foliage attached – outer layer of bulb should be dry and papery

Leeks:

- Can be planted in the garden a week after last frost date – seed indoors 6-8 weeks ahead or buy seedlings
- Plant in a trench, filling in trench as the leeks grow to get a long white portion
- Feed with an organic fish or seaweed-based plant food when average temperature reaches 10C (May) and again in June
- For container grown leeks – deep container partially filled with soil – add soil as leek grows
- Never add soil beyond the point where the leaves begin to separate

Peas (shelling, snow and sugar snap):

- sow directly in garden in full sun
- In spring, sow in soil that is 10 C – about 2 cm deep - in August, sow 3 cm deep for fall harvest
- Support system needed
- Feed once at when plants are 5-7 cm with an organic fish or seaweed based liquid plant food
- Water with drip irrigation or soaker hose
- Shelling peas ready to harvest when pods have filled out but not bulging around individual peas – shells are shiny
- Sugar snap peas ready when both peas and pods are plump – pods should snap
- Snow peas ready when they have reached their mature length and peas not developed
- Critical Growth Period: when plant is in flower and pods are forming

Peppers:

- Start indoors or purchase seedlings and transplant into garden in early June
- Nighttime temperatures shouldn't be lower than 10C
- Give them warmest, sunniest spot in garden
- Plant deeply – to bottom of first set of real leaves
- Feed with an organic fish or seaweed based liquid plant food if plants stalled

Potatoes:

- Fill container with about 30 cm of growing medium – tuck seed potatoes (not grocery potatoes) 4 cm into medium
- Add more growing medium when plant 12 cm tall – leave just tops of leaves exposed
- Repeat until container filled
- In garden, create trench about 12 cm deep – put in seed potato and cover with 4 cm of soil – add more soil when 12 cm tall – add soil again for second 12 cm of growth creating a small hill
- Use seed potatoes, not potatoes from grocery store – if large cut into sections with at least 2 eyes per section – allow cut surface to crust over before planting
- Plant eyes facing up and cut surface down
- Plant when soil is at least 10C – dandelions and daffodils in bloom
- A couple of weeks after blossoms appear, can reach under plant to harvest the very small new potatoes
- Potatoes mature when foliage begins to turn yellow – stop watering
- Brush soil off potato but don't wash if storing
- Plant an onion in with each seed potato to prevent Colorado potato beetle problems
- Critical Growth Period: plant is in blossom which means new potatoes are forming

Root crops (beets, carrots, parsnips, radishes):

- Deep container required for container grown root crops
- Root vegetables should all be sown directly in garden or container
- Garden grown root vegetables should not be fertilized
- Consistent moisture essential for germination and good root formation, texture and flavour
- Keep shoulders covered

- *Beets*: container – 24 cm wide and deep – approximately 6 plants
- Beets – sow seeds directly in garden 4 weeks before last frost date – soil should be at least 7C – repeat every 2 weeks until temperature reaches 18C – thin to 7 cm apart when 4 cm tall
- *Carrots*: container – 24 cm wide and deep – deeper for long carrots – about 20 carrots
- Garden grown carrots should be sown once soil has warmed up to 15/16C – mid to late May in GTA – repeat every week or two for continuous harvest – keep moist during germination
- Thin carrots to 2 cm apart when 4 cm tall – do second thinning 2 weeks later so they are 6 cm apart
- *Parsnips*: even deeper container than for carrots
- Garden grown parsnips should be sown last week of May/first week of June - thin parsnips to 6 cm apart when they are 12 cm tall – will be slow to germinate – keep moist during germination
- *Radishes* – container can be shallower but watch moisture carefully
- Garden grown radishes can be sown once soil is at least 7C – do repeated small seedings – radishes are at their peak for only a few days – sow again in mid-August for a fall crop
- Thin radishes to 3 cm apart when they are at the 2-3 leaf stage
- Critical Growth Period for root crops: when roots are still very fine and just beginning to develop as beets, carrots, parsnips, radishes

Squash – summer and winter:

- Start indoors 3-4 weeks before last frost date or sow directly in garden when soil is warm – 20C
- Transplant seedlings late May/early June
- Pollinators needed so include flowering herbs and annuals in the vegetable garden
- Summer squash mature when blossom on end begins to wilt – pick small and pick often
- Winter squash mature when stem begins to wither and you can scratch skin without leaving a mark

Tomatoes:

- Warm soil (16C), warm temperatures (nighttime no lower than 7C), lots of sunshine, rich, organic soil
- Start indoors 6-8 weeks before date you want to plant them – plant seedlings about last week of May – plant deeply to bottom of leaves
- Determinate tomatoes – bush-like – fruit all ripens within days of initial ripening
- Indeterminate tomatoes – vine-like – flowering and fruiting continues for an extended period – require staking and pruning
- Heavy feeders – feed when planted, when flowers begin to form and when fruit begins to form – don't overfeed
- Many problems with fruit are caused by inconsistent moisture and planting too early
- Leaf and plant diseases can be prevented by practising crop rotation and providing good air circulation
- Critical Growth Period: when plant is in flower