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CUCUMBERS, MELONS, & SQUASH

We have grouped the large vine vegetables together for the single reason that they are warm season vegetables with large fruit. All of these vegetables need 8 hours of sun and average, but well drained soil. Cold temperatures will hurt fruiting potential, so use peat pots to start seedling indoors, or buy transplants and plant out 3-4 weeks after the last frost.

Cucumbers

Cucumbers are easy garden vegetables to grow. Following a few tips can increase cucumber yield tremendously and make you look like a gardening pro.

Cucumbers are divided into slicing or pickling types. While you can pick slicing varieties when small for pickling, pickling varieties are not that great for fresh eating. Also, cucumbers come in the familiar vine growth habit or the bush varieties, which save garden space.

Plant 3-5 plants per person for fresh eating and whatever your ambition is for pickling. 10-15 plants will keep you busy pickling. Plant transplants 1' apart in rows 3' apart or in 3' diameter hills. Bush varieties take less space. **Rodale's Organic Gardening Book** shows an A-frame trellis to train cucumber vines on and save space. Consider inter-planting cool crops between cucumbers rows to use your space efficiently.

The biggest mistake gardeners make with cucumbers is planting too early. The second is not maintaining adequate moisture. Add a 2" layer of mulch to keep down weeds and conserve moisture. Cucumber beetles and squash vine borers are insects that will take a lot of the fun out of growing vine veggies. Hand picking these insects is actually a very effective way to control them. If not, be prepared to dust with organic or synthetic pesticides to control. Read up on control strategies.

Harvest cucumbers frequently. If even one cucumber is left to mature, the vine will stop producing. Use pruners and clip off fruit to avoid damaging the vines.

Slicing varieties: Burpless, Slicemaster, Straight Eight, Talladaga, Lemon, White Wonder. Spacemaster (bush), Fanfare (bush), Bush Champion.

Pickling: Picklebush, County Fair 83, National Pickling, Boston pickling.

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Melons

Melons require large quantities of time, space, and vigilance. Requiring 3-4 months to produce their fruit and taking up quite an amount of garden space, planting melons is a commitment. Of course, the difference in taste of a fresh picked melon to that of a grocery store bought one, is dramatic.

Specifically, when talking melons in central Ohio, we talk about either a cantaloupe (muskmelon), honeydew melon, or watermelon. Cantaloupes and Honeydews are pretty standard size. There are small sweet varieties of watermelon now that ripen sooner, and deserve consideration. Many are even seedless.

Melons need lots of sun, rich soil, water and air circulation. Melons absolutely need warm soil and warm air temperatures, so do not plan on planting melon plants till mid/late May. Plant on hills 4-6' apart. Plan on getting 3-4 melons per vine, even though you'll see lots more flowers. Remove flowers and smaller fruits from the vine after midsummer, since these won't have time to mature before fall. Mulch 2" thick will help growth and conserve moisture. Fertilize with compost tea, or a good organic fertilizer after fruit set.

Pests will be a problem, so watch for squash vine borers, cucumber beetles and melon aphids. Water only in the morning to avoid excess water on leaves, which promotes disease. Cut off and destroy any diseased leaves.

Melons should break easily off the vine with no effort. Judging ripeness is tricky. With practice, the scent of the fruit will tell you when it's time to pick. The best judge is looking at the 'ground-spot' on the bottom of the melon. When it turns light straw to gold, it is ready to pick.

There are many varieties of melon. Check the seed racks and catalogs for the favorites.

Squash

The squash family covers a lot of territory, from acorn squash to pumpkins; spaghetti squash to zucchini. Like the other large vine vegetables, these need lots of warm weather sun and space.

There are two main types of squash: Summer squash and winter squash. Summer squash ripens in 60-70 days and all are pretty similar in taste, if not in



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Squash, cont'd.

appearance. These include green and yellow zucchini, most yellow and straight-neck squash and scallop squash. Summer squash do not keep long as compared to winter squash. Winter squash includes Acorn, butternut, delicious, Hubbard, banana, buttercup, spaghetti squash and pumpkins. These take 75-120 days to mature and can take over the garden in short order with their sprawling habit. There are bush varieties. The fruit is delicious baked or its seeds dried.

Plant squash plants in hills of prepared rich soil when soil temperature is at least 60 degrees. Vines can be trained to climb anything upright to reduce the space used. Fruit grown off the ground is generally less prone to diseases.

Water plants well, mulch soil if possible to keep weeds down and watch for the typical vegetable vine pests. Fertilize after fruit sets as squash are heavy feeders. For winter squash any flowers set after midsummer will not produce mature fruit in time for frost, so pinch those off.

Harvest zucchini and crooknecks when 6-8" long. Do not let summer squash fruit mature on vine, or the whole vine stops producing fruit. Keep picking! On the other hand winter squash needs to loaf around till the vine dies back and the shells are hard. Cut the fruit off with a sharp knife, so as not to damage the stem. If the stems is damaged or breaks off use the squash as soon as possible, or it will rot. If storing the squash, do not wash. Dry in the sun till the stems shrivel. Read up on how to store winter squash.

Transplants at the garden center are usually tried and true varieties. Check out the seed racks and catalogs for a mind boggling range of squash, pumpkins, melon and watermelons.

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