

Tips for a New Gardener

My niece who lives in Tennessee recently expressed an interest in starting a garden. Here are some tips I shared with her.

Vegetables- They are divided into 2 main groups as far as planting time. Warm season (planting now) and cool season (planted later in summer). I'm not sure what your weather is there but you want to be past the frost or protect the summer plants on cold nights with expected frost by covering with a light cloth. You may have to prop it so it doesn't lay directly on plants. As a beginner, you will probably do best with plants already started vs. seeds. Seeds are more difficult as they require more time, attention and discipline... and some basic knowledge regarding thinning and damping off (a fungal disease affecting seedlings). I buy plants but have had grape tomatoes come back for several years from seed where some dropped and remain quite tasty.

I am certainly not an experienced veggie grower but learning. Tomatoes come as determinate and indeterminate (think indefinite). Determinate is smaller/bush variety with fruit that comes pretty much all at once. They need minimal staking. Indeterminate types get quite large and need strong staking (those funnel type cages are not enough). They also keep growing until later in season and produce over a period of time. I like to have one grape size tomatoes and one large. Several herbs are good to grow near to help deter bugs. More on that later. Heads up: groundhogs, squirrels, possibly raccoons and skunks will bother them often taking a bite and leaving the rest.

If you want lettuce, spinach/leafy veggies: buy plants and get them in ground in early spring. They will bolt as weather warms. Bolting means they produce a flowering stem, quit putting energy into foliage and become bitter.

I've grown squash, cucumber, pumpkin and pole beans. All require large space and some staking. I stopped because of squash bugs (except on beans) which are a big problem here. They even attacked my tomatoes last year. I have also read from some sources that planting a ring of nasturtium will deter them (along with Japanese beetles).

Flowers - Some flowers are easy to grow from seed. Zinnia & cosmos are two of my favorites and of course marigolds are easy. The taller varieties may need some staking especially if in a windy spot. I like to shorten tomato cages and set over the area. You can also spray the wire with green/black or a more vibrant color if you desire.

Herbs – I like to use fresh herbs in my cooking and always grow basil and parsley. I've learned to grow several parsley plants as the black swallowtail butterfly caterpillar visit mine every year now and eat it down to the nubs. It does come back but for a couple weeks I'm left with none. So I try to have 'sacrifice' plants and put in different locations hoping they don't get it all. Many herbs can get out of control - i.e. mint, chives, lemon balm, oregano sometimes. So best to put these in pots or a contained area. Cilantro likes cooler weather as it bolts early. I also like thyme not just for cooking but as an edging plant. Lastly, I like Sage...the look and in a recipe for Walnut Sage Butter.

Companion Plants (plants that help each other) - A search on several sites will give you suggestions for veggies, herbs and some flowers that you might want to plant near each other. <Agriculture.vsu.edu> <extension.tennessee.edu> are two such sites. Good general sources: <ext.vt.edu> then click on lawn & garden, <gardening.ces.ncsu.edu> <www.uthort.com>

Footnotes:

Don't bite off more than you can chew.

Be careful planting edibles too close to house if you have termite treatment. Pest Company suggested no closer than 10 feet.

Also read pesticide and herbicide labels carefully before buying/use. Make sure it addresses the problem you want. More is better does NOT apply here.