



ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

The Garden Spot For week of April 13, 2009

Finally, It's Time to Plant Your Garden!

You've been seeing the seeds and vegetable plants in the local garden centers. You've had visions of luscious tomato sandwiches or fresh green beans or home-grown cucumbers. But you also knew that we would probably have **one more** frost. The calendar now says it's mid-April and the probability of another frost is pretty remote. So, it's time to get those seeds and transplants in the ground.

If you've gardened for years, you've probably got your own methods of planting. You may even have your own gardening 'secrets'. Today's article will give the new gardener some tips on planting. But who knows, maybe the seasoned veterans will get a new idea or two.

Sowing the seed

Sow seed generously to allow for seeds that fail to sprout and for seedlings that die.

As a general rule, plant a seed to a depth of not more than three or four times its thickness. If planted too deeply, the seeds may germinate but die before reaching the surface. If planted too shallow, wind or rain may blow or wash the seeds away before they sprout.

Straight-row furrows—Planting in straight rows has some advantages over other planting methods. It makes cultivation, insect control, and harvesting easier. However, straight-row furrows are not the most efficient use of limited garden spaces.

To plant a straight-row furrow, first stretch a taut cord between stakes at each end of the row. A 1½- to 2-inch-deep furrow can be made with a hoe blade for large seeds such as beans and corn. The handle of the hoe will make a ¼- to ½-inch shallow furrow for lettuce, carrots, beets, onions, and other small-seeded crops.

Wide row planting—Scattering seeds across a wide row produces greater yields of small vegetables. Seeds of carrot, beet, radish, leaf lettuce, snap beans, and onion plants are planted in a 4- to 24-inch-wide **band**, rather than in single **rows**. The bands reduce the chance of tangled malformed roots. More time and care will be necessary when hand weeding to avoid damaging small seedlings.

Hill planting—This is a commonly used method for vine crops, such as squash, melons, and cucumbers. Hills let the roots range out from the central growing point, thus obtaining more soil nutrients and water. Plant 4 to 5 seeds in a 6- to 8-inch circle. Later, thin the hill to 3 plants. Leave space between hills as recommended on the packet. Raised mound plantings are not recommended because the soil dries out much more quickly than if it were level.

“Hardening” transplants—Whether plants are purchased or grown at home, seedlings should be “hardened” or acclimated to the outdoors before being transplanted to the garden. A few days before planting, set the transplants in a shady, protected location outside. Gradually expose the plants to longer periods of sun. Also, allow the plants to dry slightly between waterings during the hardening period.

Hardening young seedlings increases their food reserves, reduces the severity of transplant shock, and increases the chance of survival in the garden.

Setting transplants into the garden—The main goal in transplanting is to avoid root disturbance as much as possible. Little damage occurs with biodegradable pots like peat pots, but such containers must be planted below the soil surface. Any peat remaining above the soil surface should be removed because it will act as a wick and draw moisture from the soil around the transplant on windy days. Make sure you water (but not overwater) your plants when you transplant them.

Fertilizing transplants—For best growth, give each plant 1 or 2 cups of a liquid starter fertilizer immediately after setting it in the ground. A starter fertilizer solution can be prepared by following directions on a water-soluble fertilizer or by dissolving 2 tablespoons of an all-purpose garden fertilizer (such as 12-12-12) in one gallon of water. This is one time when “more” is not better. Fertilizer burn damage can result if too much fertilizer is used.

If you have questions on home gardening or related topics, remember that the Limestone County Master Gardeners have a ‘HelpLine’ on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. They are highly trained and willing to help with your home gardening and home grounds questions. Their phone number is 232-5510 and they are located in an office at the Limestone County Extension Office at 1109 W. Market Street in Athens.

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