

It's not too early to plan a garden

BY BRIAN SEBADE

A garden plan can be simple or complex, depending on what you want to grow. For most Wyoming gardeners, growing five to seven crops is an achievable goal. A well-thought-out plan increases your odds for a successful garden not only this year, but for future seasons as well.

Timing is Everything

When it comes to gardening in Wyoming's cold climate and short growing season, timing is everything. Knowing when you can expect the last frost of the spring and the first frost of the fall is critical. A table of frost probabilities based on calendar dates for your area is available from the "Wyoming Agricultural Statistics" (page 32) at bit.ly/WYagstatistics2015. The table was last updated by the USDA in 2015.

Once you've determined the length of your growing season, you can devise a plan for your garden. There are generally three options: 1. directly plant seeds into the ground to germinate and establish new plants, 2. start seeds indoors using pots that can be transplanted easily into the garden, 3. purchase plants from a nursery or greenhouse.

If opting for option two, timing the seed planting is critical. If seeds are started too late, you will delay outdoor planting. If you plant them too early, plants will likely outgrow their containers, making them difficult to transplant. Keep in mind some plants can be transplanted easily, while others are more difficult. Plants will most likely need to be "hardened" to acclimate to the outside conditions. Find more information on starting seeds inside at bit.ly/Startingseeds.

Crop Selection

Growing crops that will be consumed is a good first step when selecting vegetables. It is easy to become mesmerized by the beautiful shapes and colors of vegetables in seed catalogs and publications. Unfortunately, many of the beautiful crops we see in catalogs are not well suited to Wyoming.

Selecting crops that enjoy cooler temperatures and have a short days to maturity value is important. For more information about days to maturity values and warm season and cool season crops, check UW Extension Bulletin-1115, "Gardening: Vegetables in Wyoming" at bit.ly/WYveggiegarden.

Once you've selected crop varieties, it's a good idea to purchase seeds or established plants from a reputable source. Sometimes seeds arrive mislabeled or don't germinate. Find companies that back their product. When selecting plants at a nursery or greenhouse, avoid transplants that are diseased or damaged.

Marking the garden space

Measuring the space needed before planting is helpful. Row spacing and area needed for crops are outlined in UW Bulletin-1115 (bit.ly/WYveggiegarden). Vertical structures, different planting densities, companion crop planting and varied row spacing and design can be used to maximize space in your garden. Also consider short versus tall crops, so plants are not crowded or shaded out during the growing season.

Making a plan that allows for crop rotation among garden beds and rows of the garden is fundamental. Crops should be moved to a new spot every year and not planted in the same spot for at least two to three years. Plants from the same family or those with similar nutrient requirements should not be planted in the same spot each year. Crop rotation helps break up disease cycles and avoid depletion of soil nutrients.

Although it may be many weeks before most of us in Wyoming can plant our gardens, there is plenty to think about: what crops to plant, how to plant, when to plant, companion planting, crop rotation and varieties with short days to maturity values. A little planning will help you get your garden into tiptop shape for not only this year but many seasons to come.

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