

# WARM WEATHER CROPS

Summer is prime time for growing many of the most popular garden vegetables. The long sunny days help crops such as tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers, to produce abundantly. The keys to success with warm weather crops are choosing the right varieties, timing, and growing conditions. Fruiting crops grow best in full sun. Nearly all vegetables need loose, well-drained soil to give their roots room to spread out. Raised beds are ideal for growing summer crops because they drain so quickly after heavy storms. Plant most warm weather crops right after the average last frost date in spring (*you can find out when that is from your county's cooperative extension office*).

## QUICK GUIDE TO SUMMERTIME FAVORITES

### Chard

**How to start:** Seeds or transplants

**Variety choices:** 'Fordhook Giant' is an heirloom with white stalks and large green leaves. 'Bright Lights' comes up with red, pink, and yellow stems and color-tinged leaves.

**Growing tips:** With deliberate harvesting (*a few leaves at a time*), Swiss chard will keep producing until the first frost.

### Cucumbers

**How to start:** Seeds or transplants

**Variety choices:** Slicing cucumbers such as 'Marketmore 76' and 'Bristol' bear long fruits with relatively smooth skin. Picklers like 'Supremo Hybrid' tend to be smaller and thicker and have warty skin. 'Suyo Long' and other Asian varieties are thinner and less juicy than the other types.

**Growing tips:** Cucumber vines can spread far and wide. To keep them from taking over your garden, set up a trellis and then guide the vines upward. Asian types must be trellised for the fruit to reach full size. Cucumbers of all kinds need consistent moisture or they may turn bitter tasting.

### Eggplant

**How to start:** Seeds indoors 8 weeks before the last frost date or set out transplants when the nighttime temperatures are consistently above 60°F.

**Variety choices:** 'Black Beauty' is an heirloom that bears big, dark purple fruit. The medium-size lavender balls produced by 'Rosa Bianca' are beautiful in the garden and on the plate. Asian varieties such as 'Orient Charm' are longer than they are round and come in white, purple, or green. If you have a container garden, look for 'Patio Baby'.

**Growing tips:** Avoid planting eggplant near its close relatives, tomatoes and peppers, as they share common pests and diseases. As the fruit ripens, check it often and harvest on the younger side—as it matures, eggplant gets seedier and more bitter-tasting.

### Melons

**How to start:** Seeds or transplants

**Variety choices:** Orange-fleshed muskmelons (*often called cantaloupes*) are the easiest to grow. 'Iriquois' is an heirloom well-adapted to mid-Atlantic gardens. 'Honey Bun Hybrid' stays compact, so it's a good choice for smaller spaces. Charentais types are prized for their flavor. With watermelons, you can choose from mammoth varieties such as 'Crimson Sweet' or modest-size 'Sugar Baby' and many in-between.

**Growing tips:** Many gardeners plant melons in "hills," or raised mounds with three to four plants, and then direct the vines away from the center. Melons require a lot of water to grow to their full-size and maximum juiciness.

### Okra

**How to start:** Transplants

**Variety choices:** 'Clemson Spineless' is an heirloom variety of this tropical plant that thrives in hot mid-Atlantic summer weather. 'Burgundy' has stems with a reddish tinge and deep red pods.

**Growing tips:** A relative of hibiscus, okra opens up its yellow flowers in midsummer, followed by the edible pods. The 3- to 6-foot-tall plants are attractive enough to go in the back of an ornamental bed. Pick the pods when they are small and tender.



# WARM WEATHER CROPS continued

## Peppers

**How to start:** Seeds indoors 8 weeks before the last frost date or set out transplants when the nighttime temperatures are consistently above 60 degrees F.

**Variety choices:** You'll find varieties that ripen to red, orange, yellow, or striped—green is an immature color that most peppers pass through on their way to their fully ripened hue. Sweet peppers come in bell shapes, like heirloom 'California Wonder', or more tapered like 'Jimmy Nardello'. You can choose from a wide range of chile peppers shapes and levels of heat, from plump, mild jalapenos to searing orange habaneros. 'Tangerine Dream' is a sweet variety with small pods that stays compact for container growing.

**Growing tips:** When the pods begin to mature, the branches of pepper plants can be weighed down, so you want to give them support to prevent them from breaking off. Peppers can take a long time to reach their final color after the pods are full size—it's worth waiting to get pods that are brighter, more flavorful, and more nutritious.

## Squash

**How to start:** Seeds or transplants

**Variety choices:** Summer squash, including zucchini, have thin, edible skins. 'Golden Crookneck' is an heirloom that's bright yellow on the outside with pale flesh inside. 'Black Beauty' bears lots of dark-green zucchini, while 'Cocozelle' has pale-green stripes. Winter squash, such as butternut, spaghetti, and pumpkins, grow all summer for harvest in early fall. There are so many options, from modest-sized delicata types to large 'Connecticut Field' pumpkins, and, with their hard rinds, you can store them until you're ready to eat (or carve) them. Most squash vines are too long for containers, but you can find a few compact varieties if you want to try planting them in large pots.

**Growing tips:** For a longer harvest of summer squash, plant fresh seeds or transplants about two weeks apart. The traditional 'Three Sisters' combo of corn, beans, and squash used by Native Americans relies on the big leaves of squash to suppress weeds. That makes squash vines a good partner for tomatoes, peppers, and other summer crops that grow upward.

## Sweet Corn

**How to start:** Seeds

**Variety choices:** While local sweet corn is abundant in summer, it can be fun to try raising it yourself. 'Country Gentleman' is a very sweet heirloom with white kernels and 'Golden Bantam' is the classic yellow variety. Growing your own lets you try colorful popcorn varieties such as 'Strawberry' and 'Calico'.

**Growing tips:** Corn is a heavy feeder, so fertilizing weekly with a fish-and-seaweed liquid ensures the stalks grow tall and the ears fill out. Plant only one variety at a time to prevent cross-pollination that can produce unappealing mixes.

## Tomatoes

**How to start:** Seeds indoors 8 weeks before the last frost date or set out transplants when the nighttime temperatures are consistently above 60 degrees F.

**Variety choices:** You can choose from thousands of tomato varieties, in sizes ranging from softball to pea, and in colors that include orange, yellow, purple, green, and striped, as well as the classic red and pink. Beefsteak types, such as heirloom 'Brandywine' or hybrid 'Big Beef', have the best tomato flavor. For consistent and abundant yields, try 'Celebrity', which bears medium-size red fruit. 'San Marzano' is a flavorful and productive plum tomato, perfect for making salsa or marinara sauce. Cherry tomatoes, including 'Sweet Million', 'Sun Gold', and 'Yellow Pear', start ripening in midsummer and keep going strong until the end of the season. For containers, look for compact bush types, such as 'Tiny Tim'.

**Growing tips:** Plant tomato stems in the soil up to the first pair of leaves—they will grow roots along the stem and produce a sturdier plant. When tomato plants begin to grow above their trellis or cage, you can clip off the top growth, which will stimulate the plant to grow more lower branches and become bushier.

## Sweet Potatoes

**How to start:** Root-bearing stems, referred to as "slips", go in about three weeks after the last spring frost.

**Variety choices:** 'Centennial' and 'Georgia Jet' have bright orange skin and flesh and are good choices for the mid-Atlantic region because they mature in 90 days from planting. Red-skinned 'Beauregard' is prized for its extra-sweet flavor.

**Growing tips:** Sweet potatoes bear leaves that can be bright green or purplish, depending on the variety. The trailing vines make them an attractive addition to decorative containers. Each plant produces three or four edible tubers.

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