

County Agent News
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Vegetable Gardening

While the unusually warm weather makes it seem like spring is around the corner we know the calendar says differently. It may not be practical to start spading the garden but there are things we can do. Seed catalogs have been coming for over a month already and some of us are having a problem not ordering every new variety with a beautiful picture and a great story line. Before ordering all those enticing new varieties plus a few old favorites we do need to think about space and also labor for planting, weed control, harvesting, and what we will do with that bountiful harvest. I have plenty of space, at least outside of my high tunnel, which was not treated well by strong winds last year. I still have a tendency to over purchase seed and then over plant a larger area than I can take care of once haying season hits. Even knowing that I probably have most of the seed I need it is still fun to peruse the seed catalog and look at the new varieties which promise to out produce all other varieties.

I have a few varieties which always do well for me like Straight Eight cucumbers. There are a number of slicing varieties which consistently do better in research trials but in my gardens it seems that the old Straight Eights still do better. Scarlett Nantes carrots are another variety which I can't seem to let go. Detroit Red beets and Northern Xtra Sweet sweet corn are others. If I could content myself with just planting moderate amounts of those I would be OK but I also like to experiment with new varieties and with different vegetables.

I also have another problem common to North Dakota gardeners. In a climate where it is sometimes difficult to grow plants I have a difficult time pulling out healthy seedlings! Thinning is a problem for me. I just can't bring myself to discard those healthy seedlings. That creates a couple of problems. First, I don't thin enough. Overcrowding plants within a row means the plants themselves become weeds competing with each other and reducing overall production and often resulting in misshapen root vegetables like carrots, beets, rutabagas, etc. and smaller tomatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins and others. Second, not being able to discard those healthy seedlings I often transplant them meaning even more garden space to take care of and more excess produce at harvest time.

What really gets me though is my fondness for the unusual and different and "to just see if I can grow it". Yellow and purple carrots, purple string beans, "yard long" string beans and cucumbers, funny shaped gourds, extra large pumpkins, tiny pumpkins, white pumpkins, green and red sweet corn, strawberry popcorn, and the list goes on. Those are just the unusual, then there are the crops which we normally don't think of as being raised in North Dakota at all. I've tried sweet potatoes a couple of times with limited success but I know other growers in the state who have been more successful. I haven't tried peanuts but know growers who have successfully raised peanuts and Marvin Baker in Carpio actually harvested cotton last year.

Although spring may be a few months off, it can be fun to flip through the seed catalogs and it is almost time to be starting certain plants if you are into starting your own transplants. One of the keys to successfully start your own transplants is timing them correctly. While a few plants need up to 12 weeks before transplanting most need six to eight weeks and some only four. Plants which are started too soon often don't transplant well. Too late and they just don't gain an advantage over those directly seeded into the ground.

Next week I'll point some of the recommend times before transplanting for various species and add a few tips for starting your own transplants.