



## Vegetable Selection for Home Gardens

Our area's Easter snowstorm may have tempered gardeners' enthusiasm a bit, but it is definitely time to finish selecting what vegetables you are going to grow this year. On-line or catalog orders are a constantly available opportunity, and vegetable and fruit plant & seed sales are considered 'essential' under the current Safer at Home order in Wisconsin, so you will be able to purchase vegetables. Of course, please keep yourself and your family safe in the process of doing so, if you do go to a store in person, and follow the individual business' procedures.

However you decide to procure seeds or plants, we are going to focus in this article on the key criteria you should consider when selecting them. First, make sure your family actually likes them. Granted, this sounds a bit silly, but you don't want to plant 20 plants of a new tomato or cucumber cultivar only to find out that the flavor doesn't match your family's desires. Part of the fun of gardening is trying new species or cultivars, but do so with caution and only try a small row of a new carrot or a plant or two of a new tomato, pepper, etc... until you know that you do like it. Along with the new ones, have your primary production be the stand-by types that you know are acceptable for your flavor and use desires. If trying something new, consider one of the recommended cultivars found in the Vegetable Cultivars and Planting Guide for WI Gardens, available free online at: <https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0145/8808/4272/files/A1653.pdf> This publication also gives suggested planting date ranges.

A key consideration is maturity. Granted, this is a relative measurement. A 55-day tomato does not produce mature, edible fruit 55 days after planting the seed. However, a 55-day tomato will produce edible fruit much sooner than will an 80-day cultivar. In the Marinette County region, you will want to avoid growing vegetables that have days to maturity ratings of over 100 days. The only way these are viable is if you start the seeds indoors long before you are able to transplant them outside. In particular, avoid longer day maturity vine crops (squashes, pumpkins, melons); tomato family plants (tomatoes, eggplant, pepper); and any other full-season, heat-loving crop that is later maturing.

Other traits to consider include plant size, growth habit, disease resistance, and pest likelihood. If planting in-ground gardens, you have more flexibility on the first two traits, but if planting in containers, you will likely want to select smaller plants. Simple to grow plants can surprise you if you get the wrong trait. A row of green beans you thought were bush-type, but are actually pole beans, may goof up your garden plan, and will definitely create a need for a full-scale trellis or support system. Alternatively, an easy way to expand a small garden's production is to raise vining crops and go vertical.

Some pests are very predictable, and if we don't have the inclination to manage them, we may simply not want to plant the vegetables which they impact. In some vegetables, we can select for pest resistance and make our gardening less frustrating and require less work. Not all plant groups have natural pest resistance, however. There is no resistance within the cabbage family to the caterpillars which feed on them. However, in vine crops, we can select cultivars that have powdery mildew resistance, a disease that affects our area's vine crops every year and can be very devastating. Many tomatoes have resistance to various root affecting fungi and some viruses, but there is no natural resistance to our most common tomato diseases – Septoria leaf spot and early blight.

Some vegetables have types within which we need to choose. A good example is onions. In our region, we need to plant long-day onions and get them in the ground as early as feasible. Long-day onions will start forming the bulb after triggered to do so by nights being shorter than a certain number of hours. In our northern region, this occurs in mid to late June. If we plant short-day onions, such as Vidalia types, they would not be triggered to start forming their bulbs until way too late in our growing season and we would likely only get green, salad-type growth from them.

The most commonly grown home garden vegetable is tomatoes. If you buy seed and start your own plants, you can choose from over 500 different cultivars. Buying plants locally, you may have 20-30 to choose. Either way, make sure the growth habits fit your desires. Tomato plants come in all shapes and sizes, but the most important difference is whether they are determinate or indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes are generally more compact plants and the key is that they form all their flowers within a relatively short time frame, meaning that most of the fruits mature within a shorter time period. These are the types grown for commercial harvest to make into tomato products, but also work very well for home canners. Indeterminate tomatoes are more vining, larger plants which produce flowers up until they get killed by frost. This trait gives them more yield capacity, but can also be frustrating, as they may put their energy into constant growth and blooming and not into maturing the fruits already set on the plant, leading to very late maturing fruit. You can help get around this by pruning off new blossoms starting in early to mid-August. There are also some tomatoes that are in-between the two traits and are usually termed 'semi-determinate'.

We can't review every possible decision point here, but if you do a little homework and look at resources such as the planting guide already referenced, you can find information to assist you in your processes. Anyone can always contact Scott Reuss, UW-Madison Division of Extension Agriculture/Horticulture agent, with any questions about vegetable selection, or any other horticultural or agricultural issue. He can be reached via phone at 715-732-7510 or e-mail to [scott.reuss@wisc.edu](mailto:scott.reuss@wisc.edu)