Expand your options with homegrown veggies

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, UK Department of Horticulture

More than likely, it’s safe to plant your vegetable garden now, if you haven’t already put in some cold-season plants like spinach, lettuce and radishes. We’ve been hit with waves of unseasonably cold weather this year, but keeping fingers crossed, the worst is probably behind us.

Before you start, it’s a good idea to make a plan. Plans will save you time and money.

The first step is to think about the vegetables your family enjoys eating and the ingredients that go into dishes you enjoy cooking. Do you like spaghetti and pizza? Tomatoes grow abundantly in most gardens, as do peppers and herbs such as oregano, basil and thyme. You could also plant some onions. Do you like to can and freeze your harvest for winter meals? Corn and beans are good options for that.

Though some fruits and vegetables aren’t going to like Kentucky’s climate – say goodbye to those dreams of growing avocados – there are many plants that will love your backyard garden. This might be the year to venture out beyond the basic salad ingredients and experiment, both in the garden and the kitchen. If you plan carefully, you can have a three-season garden, filled with vegetables that come to maturity throughout the spring, summer and fall. Melons, squash, sweet potatoes, beets, parsnips, potatoes, beans and eggplant will all grow well in this area. And don’t forget kale. The superfood can often extend your backyard harvest into winter. That plant will survive almost anything thrown at it.

While many vegetables are annuals, which means they only live for one growing season, some, like asparagus and rhubarb, are perennials and will come back each year, providing you with an abundance of fresh food for years to come.

Now that you know what you’d like to grow, think about the needs of each variety. Most vegetables are full-sun plants and like more than six hours of sun a day. A few can make do with less. How much water does it need? Does it do best when the temperatures are cooler, or will it thrive in the heat of late summer? It’s a good idea to plant vegetables that have similar needs together. Mixing thirsty plants with drought tolerant plants may not give you the best results.

The next step in your plan is to decide what your garden will look like. If you have limited space, raised beds or containers might work best for you. Consider your placement, too. Where will your garden get the best light for the vegetables you want to grow? You should also plant where it’s easy to reach. If you have to drag 100 feet of hose to water it, you might find that the thrill of gardening evaporates the hotter and dryer the weather gets—when you most need the hose!

Draw a plan for your garden. Plant perennials together. Remember that tall plants like corn and tomatoes may shade your other plants, so you may want to plant them on the north side of the garden, unless you want their help with shade-tolerant plants like lettuce. If you have a good-sized garden, plan to leave 2.5 feet between your rows to allow space for walking. If you’re planting in a raised bed, these are typically no wider than 4’ across, which allows easy access from the sides. The rows in raised beds can be anywhere from 12 to 20 inches wide, depending on the needs of the plants. Often the row is temporary, and plants will fill in the space between the rows. This way, garden plants may eventually out-compete weeds for sunlight.

Read more information about vegetable gardening in the University of Kentucky horticulture publication, A Beginner’s Guide to Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky, http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/HO/HO118/HO118.pdf, or contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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