



CARING FOR YOUR VEGETABLE PLANTS: CUCURBITS

Cucurbits (e.g., cucumbers, melon, squash, pumpkins) are warm-season crops that can be grown over a wide climatic region. However, they do not tolerate frost. Cucurbit crops are similar in their appearance and requirements for growth. (See separate Care Guide specifically for squash.)

Generally, in the cooler coastal regions of the Bay Area, cucurbit seedlings can be set out in May. In the warmer interior regions, planting can generally occur a month earlier. Set plants out during the late afternoon or early evening when the wind has died down, to avoid stress from the hot summer sun. Set plants out approximately 2 feet apart (up to 4 feet for winter squash and pumpkin), and slightly deeper than they grew before. Dig a hole for each plant roughly twice as wide and twice as deep as the soil ball. Press the soil firmly around the plant and water thoroughly to remove any air pockets. Water the plants immediately. An application of 1 to 2 cups of diluted fertilizer solution may help each plant as a starter fertilizer. If transplanting in hot weather, shade the plants in the middle of the day for the first week or use floating row cover.

Cucumber trellising

Most varieties of cucumber vines spread from row to row. Training on a cage, trellis or fence along the edge of the garden will correct this and also lift the fruit off the soil. Trellising gets leaves up off the ground so that they dry off faster. Also, if the vines are trellised, the gardener is less likely to step on the vines and there is no need to move the vines for weeding or other purposes, reducing the risk of damage. If trellising is not possible, there are many excellent bush varieties of cucumber available now. Most of them produce well for a limited amount of space and may be a desirable alternative in a small garden. If vines are not trellised, avoid destroying blossoms or kinking vines by gently rolling the vines away rather than lifting them when searching for harvestable fruit. In non-trellised plantings, organic materials are useful in the summer to return moisture and keep the fruit clean. Working in the vines when leaves are wet could spread disease. Wait until after morning dew or rain evaporates.



Watering

Cucurbits may be grown under drip, sprinkler, or furrow irrigation. Avoid wetting the foliage or fruit with overhead watering. Apply water to 1-foot depth to insure deeper rooting. Cucurbits need regular moisture. If plants are stressed for water when they start to set fruit, the melons will be small and rot will increase. In squash, water stress will result in deformed fruit. If plants get too much water, it may cause fruit to split.

Fertilizing

Cucurbits require low nitrogen and high potassium and phosphorous for good fruit development. Do not over fertilize with nitrogen as this encourages vine growth and retards fruiting. Bush, dwarf, and short-vined plants do not need as much fertilizer as standard types. Apply a complete balanced fertilizer after plants have started vigorous growth and then periodically thereafter.

Harvesting

Harvest cucumbers when they are about 2 inches long up to any size before they begin to turn yellow. Remove fruits by turning cucumbers parallel to the vine and giving a quick snap because it prevents vine damage and results in a clean break. Keep cucumbers picked or it will slow down the growth of the other fruits. Harvest zucchinis when they are 2 inches in diameter or 6 to 10 inches long. Pick yellow types at 4 to 7 inches and patty pan or scallop types when they are 3 to 5 inches in diameter. They are usually ready to pick 4 to 8 days after flowering. Harvest winter r squash when stems are greyish and starting to shrivel. Pumpkins should be harvested when they have a deep, solid color and the rind is hard. The vines will usually be dying back at this time.

Pest Management

Thorough information on pest management can be read at:

<http://www.ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/veggies.html>