

Time to plant

By Jan McDaniel

Photography by Daniel Giles

Good foods are like good companions – they nourish the soul.

Growing your own vegetables can be an enjoyable, inexpensive and rewarding hobby.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System Web site at www.aces.edu recommends selecting a well-drained location in full sun and testing the soil (pH should be around 6.0 to 6.5) or adding a balanced 10-10-10 fertilizer.

Their "Planting Guide for Home Gardening In Alabama" makes it easy to choose something for every appetite. May is the perfect time to plant lima or pole beans, cucumbers, eggplants and peppers.

Follow these with a June planting of sweet corn, okra, sweet potatoes and southern peas. Don't forget tomato plants and a few hills of yellow squash or zucchini.

Other tips include using mulch for weed control before you reach for chemicals. A weekly watering of one inch, or an equivalent rain, encourages strong roots and healthy plants.

Good planning, clean seed, early weeding, removal of old or diseased plants and crop rotation prevent diseases and help with insect control. Battle harmful insects organically with the ladybug, praying mantis and organic soaps made for this purpose.

To feed a family of four during the growing season and have extras left for canning or freezing, "The Old Farmer's Almanac Gardening Companion" recommends a row garden measuring 10 feet by 16 feet.

No time or space for a garden?

Consider raised beds framed with landscape timbers. These narrow areas allow every inch of soil to be productive.

If you have difficulty working at ground level, container gardening may be your best choice.

Tomato plants, herbs and strawberries thrive in pots, attractive planters or window boxes. Outside, additional benefits to growing aromatic herbs include repelling flies and mosquitoes and attracting beneficial garden insects. Tarragon, basil, rosemary, garlic, mint, parsley and sage do double duty in the garden and on the plate. Check the library or Internet for the best herb match for your needs.

If this sounds like a lot of work, think of ways to recruit help. Involve family and friends. Children are often eager to take care of "their" favorite corner of the garden. Look for learning opportunities, such as building a pole bean teepee or showing your child garden visitors like birds and butterflies.

With careful planning, your garden can be as unique and extensive as your vision and can grow in scope, beauty and usefulness each season.

Where else but in a garden can you become a partner with nature, find peace and satisfaction from the work of your own hands and receive the rewards of healthy foods and exercise?

Good for body, mind and soul, gardening in the Shoals is the beginning of a beautiful friendship between you and the land.

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