

Vegetable Gardening in the Florida Keys

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October through April is the main vegetable growing season for the Florida Keys. During this time the weather and seasonal patterns are changing from the hot, humid summer temperatures with long daylight hours to cooler, drier temperatures with shorter daylight hours.

In order to successfully grow vegetables you need to provide a sunny location, regular watering, a raised bed or container garden, wood mulch, slow release fertilizer, and vegetable seeds or transplants.

- **Sun.** Fruiting vegetables will be more productive if given full sunlight for a minimum of five to six hours during the middle of the day. If you have limited amounts of full sunlight grow leafy vegetables; they can withstand more shade.
- **Water.** For a raised bed garden keep the soil moist to a depth of six to eight inches. For containerized vegetables, check the plant daily to see if it needs watering. For newly planted surface seeds, keep the soil moist until they germinate then lengthen the period between waterings.
- **Water problems.** Salt-laden winds and irrigating with salty water will harm vegetable plants. During the winter months, if you live on the Gulf side of the Keys, provide screening from the strong north winds. For those who irrigate with well water, during the months of February to April check the water salinity levels. Drop a sample off at the Extension Office for salinity testing.
- **Vegetable growing methods.** The Keys soils are low in organic matter, have a high soil pH level and are difficult to dig; therefore two successful gardening methods are raised beds and container gardening.

1) Raised beds. Construct a bed frame to a height of 24 inches out of concrete blocks, rock, bamboo slats, or wood. If you are concerned about using pressure-treated wood in creating your garden box, cedar and cypress woods have natural preservatives. Pickax the ground surface to a depth of 10 inches or so, then screen the materials through a 1/2 inch by 1/2 inch hardware cloth. Loosen the native soil under the garden soil to improve the soil drainage. Return sifted materials to the garden area, add a soil mix of one part sand to one part composted organic matter. Mix thoroughly in place.

2) Container gardening. If you do not have sufficient yard space or live in an apartment, try growing your vegetables in containers. Almost any container is suitable as long as it is durable and large enough to hold the fully-grown plant. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/VH032> Fill the container with the growing medium. Use any prepared potting soil mixes or create your own:

- Two 5 gallon buckets of vermiculite, two 5 gallon buckets of peat moss, 1 1/2 cups of dolomite and 1 1/4 cups of 6-8-8 fertilizer with trace elements, thoroughly mix.
or
- Two 5 gallon buckets of sand or garden soil, two 5 gallon buckets of peat, cow manure or well-decomposed compost, 1 1/2 cup of dolomite and 1 1/4 cup of 6-8-8 fertilizer with trace elements.
- **Mulch.** Mulching is an important practice that reduces weed populations, retains soil moisture, prevents soil erosion and keeps the soil cooler. Common mulching materials are free mulches from the local utility companies or landscaping businesses or store bought mulch, pine straw, leaves, sawdust wood shavings, pine bark, and newspaper.
<http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/landscaping/mulch.html>
- **Fertilizer.** To grow healthy vegetables in a raised bed garden you will need to provide organic (animal manures or compost), inorganic fertilizer, or a combination of both.

For **organic fertilizers** add 25 to 100 pounds per 100 square feet before planting. Since animal manures are not a balanced fertilizer, supplement each 100 square feet with two to three pounds of a 6-6-6 inorganic fertilizer. After planting add up to five pounds per 100 square feet area. Remember that if the animal manure or compost is fresh, spread it a minimum of three weeks ahead of planting. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/VH019>

For **inorganic fertilizers** use a fertilizer that contains a balanced proportion of nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus, such as a 6-6-6. In a ten foot row you can place five ounces in a furrow beside the plant or broadcast two to three pounds per 100 square feet. During the growing season apply two to three additional light nitrogen and potassium applications depending on your soil type and vegetable crop.

- **Vegetable types.** Beans, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, collards, lettuce, mustard, onions, parsley, peas, peppers, potatoes, radish, spinach, squash, tomatoes, turnips and more can be grown at this time of year. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>