Give Your Plants a Great Start in the Garden

Acclimating—Hardening Off

Plants that are purchased as ready to transplant into your garden have probably been grown in a greenhouse environment and have not been exposed to the outdoor elements (wind, cold or warm temps, direct sunlight, and pests). Greenhouse grown plants are healthy and disease free but need to be conditioned to the location they will be planted in.

Plants need to adapt to the new environment; this is called ***Hardening Off.*** This process can take a few days depending on the weather. You will need to gradually expose the plants to the light, wind, and current temperature over several days to a week. Especially if the temperature is fluctuating, cold for a few days, then warm, then cold again.

- Set plants out in filtered morning light for a few hours.
- Each day extend the time of exposure as well as the amount of light. Watch for signs of overexposure such as wilting, yellowing leaves and/or dry soil.
- Do not transplant it into the garden in full sun for at least a week.

Transplanting in the Garden

Several days before you plan to add the plants to the garden prepare the soil by adding any additives that need time to breakdown such as manure, etc.

On the day you move the plants to the garden, add compost to the area and mix in.

Several hours before transplanting, water the plants thoroughly. Do not allow the roots to dry out completely. Handle the plants with care to prevent disturbing the roots or stems. Gently remove the plant from the pot but gently taping the side of the pot and sliding the plant out, keep the existing soil around the roots to help protect them.

Transplant Depth

Check the recommended spacing for each type of plant to ensure there is enough room for growth at maturity. Additionally, set the plants at the depth or slightly deeper than they were planted in the pot. An exception to this rule is planting tomatoes. These can be planted deep, up to lowest set of leaves. If the tomato plant is very tall remove leaves up to the top 2 or 3 sets and plant as deep as possible. New roots will develop on the stem area that is under the soil, this will provide a strong root system and provide stability for the plant as it grows taller. Ask a Master Gardener how to plant a tomato by laying it in a trench.

Dig the hole larger than the root system and set the plant in the hole and press soil firmly around the roots. Pour 1 cup of started solution around the plant (see fertilizer section for details).

Fertilizing

Fertilizer is the food for plants, it is made up of 3 elements nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) potassium (K) mixed in various combinations depending on the needs of the plant: Nitrogen provides leafy top growth, phosphorus for root and fruit production and potassium for cold hardiness, disease resistance; and general durability.

A good starter solution can be made using a balanced fertilizer such as 20-20-20. Mix 1-2 tablespoons of the fertilizer in 1 gallon of water. Apply 1 cup of the solution to the hole of each transplant. Do not over fertilize as this can cause burn damage to the roots and plant.

Be careful to follow manufacturers recommended guidelines for additional fertilizing during the growing season. Tomatoes, peppers and eggplants benefit from a balanced fertilizer that provides the nutrients needed for healthy plants that have good fruit production.

Adapted from the Texas Master Gardener Handbook. Edited by Jayla B

TIPS FOR GROWING GREAT TOMATOES

1. Do not plant tomatoes in shade. 6 hours of sun minimum.
   Sunlight = large, tasty fruit. Shade = skinny, straggly vines.
2. 2. Prepare the site by mixing in organic matter & fertilizer.
3. lant in raised beds. Raised beds warm up earlier in spring.
4. Select locally proven varieties with a VFN after their name. By selecting a VFN variety you are two diseases and one case of nematodes ahead.
5. Use a starter solution at transplanting. This could be either a synthetic liquid feed product or an organic solution like compost or manure tea, or fish emulsion.
6. Mulch soil a few weeks after planting to control weeds, hold moisture and reduce some disease problems.
7. Stake or cage plants to keep fruit off the ground.
8. Feed plants weekly with a balanced fertilizer beginning after the first fruit set.
9. Water regularly when the weather begins to warm up. Deep soakings are best.
10. Inspect plants regularly for signs of insect and disease damage.

Adapted for use from an online article by Daphne Richards, County Extension Service Agent—Horticulture, 2006, https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/travis/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/tomato_tips.pdf

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TIPS FOR GROWING DELICIOUS PEPPERS

- Peppers grow in all types of soils but do best in heavier, well-drained soils. Plant them in areas that receive at least 6 hours of sunlight each day.
- Peppers grow best in warm weather. Plant them only when all danger of cold weather has passed.
- When transplanting move the plants carefully from the container and set them in the transplant holes. Leave as much soil as possible around the roots. Fill the hole with soil and pack it loosely around the plant. Do not cover the roots deeper than the original soil ball.
- Water the plants enough to keep them from wilting. Slow, deep watering helps the root systems grow stronger. Do not let pepper plants wilt, this will reduce yield and quality of fruit.

For more Pepper information visit:
https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2013/09/EHT-038.pdf

TIPS FOR GROWING TASTY EGGPLANTS

1. Eggplant is a tropical plant, so it is very sensitive to cold and should not be planted outside until after all risk of frost has passed and daytime temperatures are at least 65°F. The plants will grow to 2-4 feet, so space them 24 inches apart.
2. Eggplants need a consistent supply of nutrients. Use a starter solution when planting.
3. Consistent water is important, at least 1 inch per week. It is better to give one thorough soaking than several frequent short waterings, because frequent watering promotes shallow roots.

Adapted from an article by Joe Masabni, Extension Horticulturist and Patrick Lillard, Extension Assistant, The Texas A&M System. The complete Eggplant article is found at:
https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2013/09/EHT-036.pdf

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit the AgriLife Bookstore!

For more information on varieties, planting and maintenance of your vegetables and herbs, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service has a number of publications available including:

- **Aggie Horticulture:** http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu
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- **Aggie Horticulture Vegetables Resources:** http://aggiehorticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/

For additional information or to receive printed copies of a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service publications, contact the

- **Master Gardener Help Desk at 281-341-7068 or**
- **Visit the Fort Bend County Master Gardeners' Website and Social Media**
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