

GROWING VINE CROPS

WHAT'S CONSIDERED A VINE CROP: Melons, cucumbers, pumpkins, summer squash, winter squash, and gourds are commonly referred to as vine crops.

PLANTING: Vine crops are traditionally planted in 'hills', a raised mound of soil 1-2 feet in diameter placed 3 feet apart. Consider working in compost into your soil for increased yields. If direct seeding, plant 3-4 seeds in the center of each mound. After they emerge, thin the plants to 2-3 healthy seedlings. Transplants generally consist of 2-4 seeds per container. If grown in a fiber pot, slice the sides with a sharp knife and plant the whole container in the ground. If they are in a plastic pot, gently shake it out leaving as much of the root ball intact as possible. Do not attempt to separate the plants; vine crops have tender roots which are sensitive to disturbance. Water the mound well.

GROWING: Warm weather and warm soil is needed. Plant outdoors after **May 15th** or when you're confident temps will not dip below 60F. Many experienced gardeners will not plant until the end of May when the soil is warmer. Provide ample water during dry conditions, especially in July and August. Water until the ground is saturated. Repeat once a week or twice in dry weather.

During mid-summer, an application of a balance fertilizer such as a 10-10-10 or compost can be top dressed on the mound.

PEST AND DISEASE: Watch for cucumber beetles and squash bugs. They can quickly defoliate, stunt, or kill your plant. Use an insecticide labeled for vegetables if harmful insects are present. **Use insecticides only at dusk when pollinators are no longer working in the garden. Mulching or using plastic will greatly decrease the harmful insect population. Powdery mildew can be treated with a fungicide suitable for vegetables.** Other disease problems include mosaic virus and bacterial wilt. There is no cure for these diseases, your only defense is to remove infected plants, control insects who will spread the disease, and rotate the crop every year. **Watering in the morning and only the soil (not the foliage) around the base of the plant also discourages disease.** To ensure a healthy population of pollinators, plant alyssum, prairie plants, buckwheat (do not allow to seed), or other fragrant flowers around vine crops to lure beneficial insects. With the loss of our bee population, poor pollination has become a problem in vine crops.

CUCUMBERS will begin to form in mid-summer and will continue producing for a few weeks depending on variety. It's important to pick them before they turn yellow or they will taste bitter and have a woody texture. Cucumbers have a short shelf life and should be refrigerated after harvest.

SUMMER SQUASH yield large amounts of edible fruits. Pick when young and tender. Do not allow to over mature, they will become woody and lose flavor. Check the plants every 2-3 days as summer squash grows quickly. If you let fruits mature beyond the edible stage, remove and compost them. Fruit that is allowed to remain will stunt the growth of the vine.

MELONS should be allowed to fully ripen on the vine. It can be difficult to tell when the time is right for harvest. Generally, the underside will turn a straw yellow color, the skin will mature to its proper color, and the vines may lighten. It should also pull easily from the vine. According to Mark Twain, a green melon says 'pink' when thumped, while a ripe one says 'punk'.

PUMPKINS Most pumpkins take around 50 days to mature after the female blossoms appear. You'll know when your pumpkins are ready to harvest when they have a rich color and the vines start to die off. The rinds will also get tough, and should resist scratching with your fingernail. Make sure you harvest your pumpkins with the stems and try to harvest before any threat of deep frosts.

WINTER SQUASH The most important part of harvesting your winter squash is making sure you harvest them before the first frost of fall. As the squash approach maturity and are ready to harvest, you'll notice that the stems of the squash will start to dry out and wither. Depending on where you live, you can expect to start harvesting in September and finish by October. Because of the vast varieties of sizes and colors, the rule of thumb for harvesting winter squash is when they are a full size and have a deep rich color. The rinds should be hard to the touch. If you harvest your winter squashes too early, they may lack flavor.

GOURDS Harvest and curing time is specific to each gourd variety. Generally, pick gourds when they are rich in color, the shells harden, and the stem begins to dry slightly. Use sharp scissors or knife and remove a couple inches of stem with the gourd. Pick before the first hard frost of fall as this can damage the fruits and cause rot. To cure gourds, wash them with a non-bleaching soap and dry in a warm dark place. Some gourds, especially small decorative ones, will dry in a matter of days. Large dipper types may take months to fully cure.