



Contact: Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

October 1996

September Tips VEGETABLES

- Near the end of the growing season pick off all tomato blossoms that won't have time to bear fruit, so plant nutrients go into existing tomatoes.
- During the fall, be sure your vegetables are adequately watered. Many crops, such as corn, pepper, squash, and tomato, won't mature correctly if stressed due to lack of water.
- Harvest winter squash and pumpkins when fully mature, but before they are damaged by frost. Cut the fruits from the vine with a short piece of stem attached. They will keep for several months if stored in a cool, dry basement.
- You can plant radishes and harvest a crop before cold weather if you hurry.
- Don't leave a thick layer of organic mulch over your vegetable garden in winter or it will take a long time for the soil to dry out and warm up in spring. Rake even a light mulch aside as planting time approaches.
- Just before frost, take cuttings of sweet potato vines and put them in water. When roots appear, transplant them into 6-inch pots and grow them in a south-facing window. By early spring, they will have developed into vines that also can be cut and rooted, allowing you to increase the number of starts for setting out in late spring.
- Tomatoes need an average daily temperature of 65 degrees F or more for ripening. If daytime temperatures are consistently below this, pick the fruits that have begun to change color and bring them inside to ripen.
- The best activator for compost is old compost.
- Parsley and chives from the garden can be transplanted to 5-inch pots for growing in the home this winter for culinary use.
- Cucumber beetles, squash bugs, Colorado potato beetles, and European corn borers pass the winter in debris left in the garden. Remove dead plant material, and compost it or plow it under. This will limit your pest population next year to the insects that migrate into the garden.
- An easy method of removing the kernels from homegrown popcorn is to hold one ear in each hand and rub them against each other. The kernels push each other off quickly. Plastic jugs make excellent storage containers for popcorn, sunflower seeds, millet, and other small seeds.
- To harvest sunflower seeds, wait until the seeds are fully grown and firm, then cut the head leaving one foot of stem. Hang heads in a dry, airy spot to finish ripening. Do not store sunflowers one on top of another or they may rot.
- Dried beans and peas are among the easiest crops to store. They will keep for many months in a cool, dry location. Control weevils before storage by placing the crop in a freezer at 0 degrees F or lower for four days or heat in an oven to 180 degrees F for at least 15 minutes. Following this treatment, place the dry beans or peas in an airtight container in a cool, dry place.
- Spinach is much better as a fall crop than as a spring crop, as it goes to seed quickly when the weather warms up in spring.
- Plant spinach, lettuce, kale, turnip, and radish in early September as the last crops for your fall garden. Soak

seed furrows well before sowing seed, and mulch lightly. Water the rows daily to promote germination and growth of young seedlings.

- Save seeds from favorite self-pollinating, non-hybrid flowers, such as marigolds, by allowing the flower heads to mature. Lay seeds on newspaper, turning often to dry; then store in glass jars or envelopes in a cool (40 to 50 degrees F), dry, dark place.
- Onions should be mature now. Dig on a clear, dry day and store in a shady, dry place in mesh bags or discarded panty hose or braid into a rope and hang.
- Green tomatoes can be stored for four to six weeks and will gradually ripen to a nice, red color. The best storage conditions are about 60 degrees F with a moderately moist atmosphere. Harvest the tomatoes in a firm, green condition before frost. Remove the stems to prevent puncturing other fruits. Wash dirt off rather than wiping it off, which can cause skin scratches leaving the fruit susceptible to decay. If the storage location is quite dry, the tomatoes can be placed in plastic-film bags or film-lined boxes to increase the humidity. Sort the fruit every week to remove those that ripen or start to decay.
- Cover crops can be planted as early as August 1, but should not be planted any later than November 1. They should make some growth before hard frost kills them. Where you have fall crops growing, you can sow cover crop seed between rows a month or less before expected harvest. This way, the cover crop gets a good start, but will not interfere with vegetable plant growth.
- Hot peppers will keep best if stored after they are dry. Pull the plants and hang them up, or pick the peppers and thread on a string. Store in any cool, dry place.
- Spray cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower with BT *Bacillus thuringiensis* every four days through harvest to avoid cabbage loopers.
- Sweet potatoes will keep for several months in a fairly dry basement. Handle sweet potatoes very carefully to avoid bruising or cutting them. Cure the roots for about 10 days at 80 degrees F or for 20 days at 70 degrees F to dry and toughen the skin. This can be done near the furnace in your basement. Store under medium-dry conditions at 60 degrees F or as close to this temperature as possible. Sort your sweet potatoes carefully every few weeks, and remove any that start to decay.
- The gardening season can be extended well into the winter. Lettuce, cress, radish, endive, and spinach can all be grown in coldframes. In cooler weather, insulate the outer sides of the frame with banked soil or sawdust. Cover the top with sacks stuffed with straw or other insulation during cold nights.
- Winter-type pumpkins and squash, such as acorn, butternut, and spaghetti, keep for several months in a cool, medium-dry basement, garage, or tool shed. Allow the fruit to ripen fully on the vine, and cure in the sun to form a hard rind. Harvest before frost, and leave a piece of stem on each when they are cut from the vine. If the floor is damp, place them on shelves to reduce the possibility of rot. The best storage temperature is about 60 degrees F.

Monthly Tips have been prepared since 1986 by various staff of the Office of Consumer Horticulture including Ellen Bennett, Michelle Buckstrup, Susan Day, Susan DeBolt, Sharon Dendy, Kate Dobbs, Sheri Dorn, David Gravell, Virginia Nathan, Jenny Shuster, Ellen Silva, and Ruth Sorenson. Resource material for the development of this information includes the Virginia Master Gardener Handbook; Extension Publications and newsletters from VCE, numerous other states, and the USDA; and an extensive library of over 900 books, magazines, and journals. Project funded by The Virginia Gardener Newsletter subscription fees. Diane Relf, Project Director and Content Specialist.

Visit [Virginia Cooperative Extension](http://www.ext.vt.edu/departments/envirohort/monthlytips/september/noteseptv.html)