KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“Growing Short Season Vegetables”

May 7, 2019

Many people love beautiful, semi-arid Central Oregon because of its sunny days and clear nights. But those clear nights, when the ground and the air cool, lead to frost almost any time of the year, even during the summer. Evening temperatures below 50° slow plant growth, decrease pollination and reduce yields, especially for heat-loving crops such as tomatoes and peppers.

It varies every year but you can roughly estimate the length of the growing season by historical averages: in Bend and Redmond, it is 90–100 days. Lower elevations like Madras and higher elevations like La Pine will be more or less than that. You can adapt the length of your season by knowing any microclimate on your site. Note the hours of sunlight, wind direction and low spots in the landscape, so you don’t plant in a low, cool, frost pocket.

Soil temperature plays an important role in how fast a plant grows. Most plants prefer a soil temperature of 60° to 80° and you can warm up the soil by using plastic mulches in the spring or by planting in raised beds. Compared to a ground level bed, the soil in a raised bed will warm up more quickly in the spring and will maintain heat longer into the fall, extending the season.

Warmer soil helps microbes break down fertilizers, making them more available to the plants. In areas with a shorter growing season, using soluble fertilizers early in the season makes the nutrients available sooner. If nitrogen is available earlier, plants may grow more quickly, compensating for the shorter growing season. A general, well-balanced fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, is fine for most crops in backyard gardening.

You can use weed-free hay or straw, herbicide-free grass clippings, rotted sawdust, wood bark chips, or compost as organic mulching materials. Apply a thin, even layer no more than 5 inches deep around your crop after the soil has warmed up in the spring. If applied too early in the season, the mulch will actually keep the soil cooler longer.

Choosing the correct vegetable variety for our climate helps ensure success. The maturity date listed on the seed packet or in the catalog should be less than 75 days. To compensate for our cool nights, add 14 days to the maturity date on a seed packet for a true date.

Start warm weather crops, such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, melons, squashes, cucumbers, and watermelons indoors and transplant outside after the last frost date. Since these are frost tender plants, keep frost-protective material nearby after transplanting.

Using a soil thermometer will help you successfully start seeds directly in the garden. If the soil is too cold, the seeds may rot before they germinate. Go to our website for this transcript’s resources which will give you a chart of the best soil temperatures for most vegetables.

In Central Oregon, we grow crops that push the limits of our normal growing season by using different types of season extenders in the vegetable garden. Warm season crops such as beans, cantaloupes, corn, cucumbers, eggplants, peppers, pumpkins, summer and winter squash, tomatoes, and watermelons can be protected from frost with high and low tunnels, cloches, cold frames, Walls O’ Water, and row cover. Floating row cover or frost cloth is made of spun polyester and can increase air temperatures underneath up to 6°, depending on thickness.

It is possible, with careful planning, selective purchasing and attentive gardening to grow your favorite vegetable in Central Oregon!

You can find more information on Growing Vegetables in Central Oregon on our website [www.gocomga.com](http://www.gocomga.com). Click on the KPOV tab on the orange bar. This has been Gardening: Get Good at It on KPOV’s The Point.

Resources:

Growing Vegetables in Central Oregon <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/catalog/files/project/pdf/em9128_0.pdf>

Recommended Vegetable for Central Oregon (fact sheet) <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/techniques/recommended-vegetables-central-oregon>