**Hints for Vegetables**

**Calvin Finch Ph.D.**

**Horticulturist and Director**

**Texas A&M Water Conservation and Technology Center**

It is time to plant some of the spring vegetables. There is a brief window of time left to plant the cool weather vegetables such as carrots, radishes, lettuce, beets, English peas, turnips, and potatoes by seed. Place onion plants in the garden. March is also the month to plant green beans, summer squash and sweet corn.

Here are some hints to consider for potatoes, sweet corn, summer squash and tomatoes.

Potatoes can be planted with special seed potatoes or supermarket potatoes that have sprouted. Cut them into pieces that are at least 1 by 2 inches and have one or more sprouts in each piece. Place a piece every 18 inches in a 1-foot-deep trench in the garden. Cover the pieces with 3 inches of soil and then add more soil every week as the plant emerges from the soil. Always leave the growing part out of the soil. Fill the trench and hill up the plants if you have the soil available.

Begin harvesting potatoes when blooms appear on the plants. All potatoes can be dug up when the tops die and brown.

The key to successful sweet corn production is pollination and that can be a problem in a small planting. To improve pollination, plant the sweet corn in compact arrangements such as short rows that are 1 foot apart with plants 18 inches apart in the row. A circle planting also works.

Plant a batch of sweet corn every 2 weeks through April to extend your harvest period.

Sweet corn is very susceptible to attacks by corn earworms so be prepared to cut off the infested portions before cooking. You can obtain some control if you apply Sevin dust or spray every week to the growing points of the plant. Organic gardeners can try replacing the Sevin with Spinosad.

Summer squash is another vegetable to plant by seed or transplant in March. Summer squash varieties include both vines and bush types. The bush types produce less squash but also require less space.

The plants are very productive if the fruit is harvested when it is small, 4-6 inches. At that stage, it is also tender and more desirable for eating.

Sweet corn is bothered by corn ear worms but summer squash has an even bigger issue with squash vine borers. The moths lay eggs on the developing plant and the eggs quickly hatch to release the larva to bore into the stems. At some point in early summer, the stems will disintegrate or at best they may just be unable to support production of fruit.

To slow down infestation by the borers, apply Sevin to the growing point of the squash every week. Organic gardeners can try the same strategy with Spinosad.

Another option to consider outsmarting the squash vine borers is to switch production in your garden from crookneck summer squash to tatumi or zucchini squash. Both can be used exactly like summer squash in the kitchen but seem resistant to squash vine borers. All of the square stem squash seem to be less susceptible to the pests.

Sometime in March it may become warm enough to plant tomatoes, but it does not work to rush the time. If the soil is too cool or if air temperatures fall below 40 degrees, tomatoes (and peppers) will quit growing. This situation is called “hardening off.” Hardening off is not desirable as it sets the plant back and postpones and reduces production. April 1 in most years is the ideal time to place tomatoes in the garden.

In the meantime, pot-up your tomatoes in 1 gallon black plastic containers of potting soil. Fertilize them and place the pots in a sunny location out of the wind. If the temperature is forecast to fall below 40 degrees, be prepared to protect the plants by moving them into shelter until temperatures increase.