

Now that you have your spring vegetable garden planted, you can sit back and relax until harvest. If you have grown vegetables before, you are probably smirking right now. And you're thinking, "Sure, if the weeds, critters and rain storms cooperate, there might be a morsel left to harvest!". We all know that a garden takes work, but it is satisfying work. As we harvest the 'fruits of our labor', we proudly acknowledge that every sore muscle and bead of perspiration was worth it.

Pest problems are always a concern to any gardener. No one wants to compete with insects for the food in the garden. There are many cultural pest management practices that you can use in the garden instead of reaching for the pesticide. Try some of these practices in your garden this year and you just may enjoy foiling those rascals without help from chemicals. There is satisfaction in fighting for your food, even if you have to resort to some backup from the pesticide sprayer now and then.

First, choose varieties of plants that are resistant or tolerant to nematodes and diseases. The plant tag or seed pack will have that information. Make sure that plants are clean and free of insects and disease when you purchase them. You should till well in advance of planting and try not to plant a particular vegetable in the same spot as it grew in last year. This helps to keep soil pests such as nematodes from building up in that location.

Nematodes are microscopic roundworms that are found in the soil of any garden. Some feed on roots and plant parts that are below the ground. They interfere with the plant's ability to take in needed water and nutrients. Unfortunately, there are no chemical controls for nematodes in home gardens but there are some cultural practices that will help keep the numbers down.

Adding organic matter to the soil will reduce nematode populations. Organic matter also helps the soil retain moisture and nutrients for better plant growth. Healthy plants show a better resistance to pest infestation. Organic matter also attracts beneficial insects that prey on nematodes. Some added materials also release gases or chemicals that are toxic to those pesky worms.

There are many insects in the garden that we certainly don't want to hurt. They are our hero bugs, hunting down and destroying the bad bugs. They are called 'beneficial insects' and include praying mantis, spiders, big-eyed bugs, assassin bugs, and lady bugs. All wasps are considered beneficial in the garden, also. Learn to identify these good bugs and welcome them on your plants. You can even plant some flowers in the garden to provide them with nectar and pollen.

Harvest vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, squash, and beans as soon as they are ripe. Over-ripe vegetables left in the garden will just attract more insects. Compost or discard plants as soon as they stop producing. Sanitation practices like these will cut down on the number of insects that will even find your garden. More harvest for you.

Read more of the UF/IFAS Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide at <http://edis.ifas.ufl/VH021> and <http://solutionsforyourlife.com> Call the Columbia County Extension Office with your questions. 752- 5384.

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