

April 2019 Farm-to-Fork News: Preparing your bountiful high-altitude garden

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With increasing sun and longer days, you may be pining to start your garden season. You may have even planted your own seeds for starts or bought your favorite seed packets. With different planting date recommendations and a myriad of information found online, you may not exactly know where to start in our short-season, high-altitude climate. While gardening is sometimes a bit of art mixed with science, with some knowledge and prep, you can develop a “green thumb” and set yourself up for gardening success!

One important step before planting is to map out your garden and the desired crops you'd like to grow. You can use a simple sketch or even map out your desired area using Google Earth to measure objects and features on your property. Consider water sources and nearby structures, trees, and shrubs that may impact the amount of sunlight on your garden. The best site for putting your garden is a spot that has easy access to water and a minimum 6-12 hours of sunlight per day, with a southwest facing aspect.

Rotate your annual veggies based on families every 2-3 years. To simplify, divide plants into legumes, roots, and leaves. Select plants that are suitable for USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 3 and 4, unless there is a warmer microclimate on your property or you can also use season extension techniques. To avoid a lot of frustration, select plants that are hardy to semi-hardy, like brassicas, greens, roots, and alliums. For simple and cost-effective season extension, utilize floating row cover or plastic mulch around your plants to help warm the soil. You can also build cold frames using recycled windows and lumber, or if you have the financial resources, buy a greenhouse or hoop house.

Consider your soil resources. Applying finished compost to the first 3-4 inches of soil is a wonderful way to replenish soil nutrients and attract beneficial microorganisms and fungi. You can buy compost or create your own to cut down on lawn and food waste. I recommend doing a soil test to get baseline soil information, then every 3-5 years to compare the nutrient levels over time. For \$25-50 you can do a soil test with our University of Idaho Extension office. The soil analysis will also give you information like pH (Teton Valley soils typically have an alkaline pH) and fertilizer recommendations. If you find that your garden site has less than optimal soil conditions, is overly rocky, compacted, and/or has lots of weeds, you can create raised beds or use containers. Not only will the raised beds allow you to create more optimal soil conditions with topsoil and compost, they also help reduce encroachment of weeds and help warm the soil allowing for earlier planting times and later harvests.

Before planting outside, make sure your soil is dry enough for planting and the threat of a hard frost has passed (typically late May or early June). You will know that the soil is dry enough if you can make a fist full of soil that forms a crumbly clump.

If you decide to start your seeds early, make sure that you have adequate light for indoor starts by placing them inside by a south or west window or use a grow light. If you plant your indoor seedlings too early before putting in the ground, they may get leggy, too big and root-bound, so plan accordingly based on your plant hardiness zone. Harden off your plant starts before transplanting by placing them outside for a few days during the day, then gradually place them outside overnight.

While this column provides some helpful locally-specific tips to get your garden started, if you are curious about learning more about planning, harvesting, and preserving your garden bounty, I will be offering my “High-Altitude Victory Garden Class” at the UI Extension Office in Driggs on Tuesdays, April 16-May 21st (no class on April 30th; class is rescheduled for Thursday, May 2nd) from 12:00-1:30 PM; \$40 per person includes notebook and publications. Pay online (plus service fee) at <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/high-altitude-victory-gardening-classes-tickets-58397073218>. Or, register and pay cash or check at our office (235 S. 5th E., Driggs, ID 208-354-2961, teton@uidaho.edu).

Jennifer Werlin is an Extension Educator in Community Food Systems for the University of Idaho in Teton County. University of Idaho Cooperative Extension offers research-based educational programs and publications in the areas of agriculture, community development and family and consumer science. Learn more at www.uidaho.edu or call 208-354-2961. The University of Idaho does not discriminate in education or employment on the basis of human differences, as required by state and federal laws. Anyone attending our program(s) that requires auxiliary aids or services should contact teton@uidaho.edu or 208-354-2961 prior to the event.