

Options for the Vegetable Garden in the Southwest Florida Summer

For many of us the coming of summer brings up a nostalgic urge to garden. Some of us have extra time in the summer months, and all of us have extra daylight for outdoor activities. Yet in Southwest Florida, the prime growing seasons are fall (approx. September to December) and spring (approx. February to May), as vegetable gardening in the hot, humid summer months presents such a challenge.

Prepare Your Garden for the Next Season

During the steamy summer in southwest Florida, pests thrive, weeds thrive, diseases thrive, but most of our typical North American vegetable crops do not thrive. And so in many ways, summertime gives you the perfect opportunity to get to the necessary tasks of tidying, making repairs, or preparing your garden space for the fall. Two strategies for making the hot, humid summer work for your garden are solarizing your soil and planting cover crops.

Soil Solarization

Solarizing your garden beds can considerably reduce your pest, weed, disease and nematode pressure for the next season. If effective, soil solarization can reduce population levels of weeds and pests in the top 4-6" of soil for 3-4 months.

To solarize your garden, first clear your garden of existing weeds and debris. Then cover the soil surface with *clear* plastic, ensuring that you bury or secure the entire edge of the plastic (to avoid heat loss). Leave the plastic in place through the summer allowing the sunlight to heat up the soil. The prolonged exposure to short-wave radiation from the sun will heat the soil to temperatures that are lethal to many pests.

To get the best results, make sure that your garden bed is in an open, unshaded area, and leave the plastic in place for at least 6 weeks. To increase the penetration and effectiveness of solarization, till the soil before applying the plastic, and apply plastic the day after rain or irrigation. Be certain to use clear plastic as opaque plastic is inadequate to properly solarize.



An example of a solarization of a large garden bed.

See [Introduction to Soil Solarization](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in856) (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in856>) for more information on soil solarization, including detailed instructions, as well as answers to frequently asked questions.

Cover Crops

As an alternative to solarization, planting cover crops is another way to prepare your garden for the coming growing season. Cover crops are unharvested crops that are planted during the off-season to protect and build your soil. In southwest Florida, cover crops can prevent runoff of your precious garden soil during the heavy rainfall and protect the soil food web from intense sun of summer. A healthy stand of cover crops blocks the growth of weeds, increases nitrogen and soil fertility, reduces pests, and even combats certain nematodes. When the biomass of cover crops is incorporated into the soil, they add to the organic matter and build soil structure. Leguminous

Cover Crops to consider for SWFL:

- Vetch (Aeschynomene)
- Cowpea
- Lablab/ Hyacinth bean
- Hairy Indigo
- Sunn Hemp
- Velvet bean

cover crops fix nitrogen and make it available to the next crop.

Furthermore, an unintentional advantage of growing cover crops can be a lush, green garden bed during the off season.

Plant your summer cover crops at the end of the spring season, and let this planting grow through the summer. To get the full benefits, cut your cover crop down just after flowers bloom (and before seed formation), and then chop and incorporate the biomass into the soil. Alternatively, you can mulch your garden bed with this material or add it to your compost pile to be incorporated later.

See [Cover Crops](https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/aa217) (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/aa217) for more information, including summer cover crops for southwest Florida.

Preparation for a Summer Garden

Summer gardening in Southwest Florida's subtropical climate is unique and has a different set of challenges—particularly the heavy rainfall and intense heat. For this reason, it can be a good idea to cover your vegetable garden during the summer. Consider covering your garden with shade cloth to diffuse the sunlight and reduce heat. Alternatively, you can place a canopy of clear plastic over your garden to control irrigation and keep rain and moisture off of your plants which can lead to many disease problems. Make sure to have open sides to allow the heat to vent out.

Raised garden beds are particularly important for summer growing in order to keep your plant roots elevated, as soil can quickly become water logged. Mulching your garden helps to keep top soil in place that otherwise might get washed away by heavy rain and suppresses vigorous summer weeds. The regular showers experienced throughout the summer can also cause vital nutrients to leach out of your soil, so be sure to apply plenty of compost early in the season and fertilize as needed.

What You Can Grow In the Summer

If you are going to try to grow edibles through the entire year, there are many perennial vegetables to consider incorporating into your yard like Moringa, Chaya, Cranberry Hibiscus or Katuk. As for your annual garden beds, the following are some vegetables to start experiment with. Many may be new to you, but are common throughout other subtropical or tropical climate areas.

Adzuki Beans

This classic favorite in many Asian cuisines can be grown through the summer for use as a dried bean. As a legume, it also fixes nitrogen in the soil, making it available for the next season's crop. Weeding is important as adzuki beans do not compete well.

Amaranth

Vegetable amaranth, known as Calaloo in the Caribbean, is grown for its edible leaves rather than its grain. Amaranth is a popular vegetable in many countries and can be eaten like spinach. Be careful—it can become quite weedy if it goes to seed.

Basil

Not many Mediterranean herbs can manage our hot, wet summers, but often basil can to power through. Look for varieties that are heat tolerant and have a resistance to downy mildew and fusarium.

Cherry Tomatoes

The Fall and Spring growing seasons are by far the preferred times for growing most tomatoes, but some cherry tomatoes varieties will grow through the summer—particularly those that are naturalized to this area like 'Everglade'.



Chayote is roughly the shape and size of a pear when it is ready to harvest.

Chayote

Chayote is a large, climbing vine, common throughout Latin America. Its vigorous growth and productivity means that it needs trellising for support. The fruits are eaten much like squash or potatoes as they are very mild and absorb the flavors nicely. Chayote can easily be propagated from a fruit.



Variegated varieties of vegetable amaranth have a beautiful dark red center.

Chinese Cabbage

Particularly recommended are the 'Yukina Savoy' and 'Tatsoi' cultivars for growing through the summer. These leafy greens also make a delicious and mild substitute for spinach.

Collards

With its ability to grow well in a wide variety of growing conditions, including high heat, collards are a staple for Southern gardeners. Collards tend to have a sweeter flavor when grown through the cool season. Look for a slow bolting variety like 'Morris Head,' 'Champion,' or 'Green Glaze'.

Eggplant

Traditional French/Italian varieties of eggplant and the long, lean Asian varieties of eggplant thrive in the heat.

Hot peppers

Several peppers will grow reasonably well in heat. But hot peppers in particular handle the heat and humidity and are fairly pest and disease resistant.

Jicama

Also called yam bean or Mexican turnip, this vine can grow quite tall. The tuber has a crisp texture and nutty flavor and can be eaten raw or cooked. Leaves, stems, and beans are toxic.

Okra

Another staple garden vegetable of the South because of its extraordinary heat tolerance. Okra is grown commercially in South Florida for harvest from late spring through early fall.

Pumpkin

Not all pumpkins will grow in the summer here, but 'Seminole' or 'Tropical' Pumpkin varieties are well adapted to the heat and humidity.

Southern Peas & Lima Beans

Unlike common beans (*Phaseola vulgaris*), Southern Peas—also known as Cowpeas, Black-Eyed Peas, or Crowder Peas—can handle the high temperatures of the SW Florida summer. Lima beans also grow well with higher heat and humidity.

Sweet Potatoes or Boniato

Sweet potatoes grow vigorously through the summer heat, and can be easily propagated with slips, vine cuttings or sections of tuber. Be watchful for white flies in late summer and early fall. If left to linger, they can do real damage to young tomato seedlings and other fall crops.

Winged Bean

Another tropical vegetable that thrives in hot humid weather. You can eat the tender winged beans, the dried mature beans, and even the root. If using as a green bean, be sure to harvest them young before they become tough and fibrous.

Yardlong Beans

These beautiful beans come in red and green varieties and grow to two or three feet in length. Yardlong beans are closely related to cowpeas, but when picked before full maturity they can be used like snap beans.



Yardlong beans come in red and green varieties.

Additional Summer Gardening Resources

There are many resources available on gardening, including the IFAS publications listed below*.

- [Introduction to Soil Solarization](#)
- [Soil Solarization for Pest Management in Florida](#)
- [Cover Crops](#)
- [Benefits of Cover Crops for Soil Health](#)
- [South Florida Garden Calendar](#)
- [Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide](#)
- Minor Vegetables

*If the links provided are no longer functional, simply enter the name of the publication in the search bar at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

Vanessa Bielema
Sustainable Food Systems Agent
(239) 252-4800 • vbielema@ufl.edu

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