

Growing Warm Season Edibles in the Low Desert (Maricopa County, AZ)

About Vilardi Gardens

Vilardi Gardens is a small, local company that grows edible garden transplants for the Phoenix, AZ area, selling to local farmers, nurseries and farmers market vendors. An "All-natural" grower, Vilardi Gardens complies with the standards of Organic plant propagation, and doesn't use any synthetic fertilizers or chemicals.

What is Organic?

What does the term "Organic" mean? The USDA controls and regulates the use of Organic certification and defines it as: "Organic produce and other ingredients are grown without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, genetically modified organisms, or ionizing radiation." (Source: www.organic.org).

Growing Summer Edibles

Growing garden edibles into the summer season here in the Low Desert of Maricopa County can be challenging and frustrating for both new and experienced gardeners alike. Changing weather norms and extreme temperature swings over short periods of time only make it more challenging. One thing is certain; it will be hot this summer. ☺

The key to success is growing plants in season. Many crops that grow all summer long in other parts of the country are winter crops here, which we grow from fall to spring. Examples are lettuces, greens, spinach and cole crops like broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and kale. Many favorite herbs are also cool-season crops here. The list of things we grow in the winter is much longer, but today this talk is about summer crops!

We have many wonderful and sometimes exotic edibles that thrive here in the summer under the correct conditions, and some edibles that can't be grown in the cooler climates, even in the summer. Your handouts have a list of some of the more common summer edibles we grow starting in April and into the fall.

What warm-season crops you can grow depends a great deal on whether you are willing to take extra-ordinary steps to protect plants from too much heat and sun in the summer. You must begin with answers to two questions.

- 1) What is the sun and shade exposure in my growing area?
- 2) What is the optimal sun/shade exposure that my crop of choice requires?

Successful hot weather gardeners create bio-zones with trees and shade cloth to help their gardens along. While there are many plants that can take full sun, there probably isn't a plant out there that wouldn't like some afternoon shade when it is 115 degrees. Creating bio-zones in your garden with shade cloth or well-planned and planted (and hopefully edible) trees may take a few years but will pay dividends for many years to come.

Other Planting Considerations

Are you planting In-ground, in Raised-beds or Containers?

What planting medium are you planting in? Are you using bagged mix, native soil homemade or purchased compost or a combination of some or all? Is it right for your situation (containers, raised beds, in-ground planting).

How will you fertilize your plant?

What will you do to consistently water?

What to Grow and When to Grow it

After you have considered your growing area and conditions, there are two tips for the beginning edible gardener.

1) Grow what you like to eat! Nothing is more satisfying than picking something fresh from the garden that you love to eat.

2) Get a local growing calendar and study it. Make sure what you like to eat can grow in the summer by consulting the growing calendar. Two great local gardening are The U of A Cooperative Extension Planting Calendar and The Urban Farm Calendar. Links to both are on your handouts and examples are available.

Lesser Known Summer Edibles

Summer Greens - Malabar Spinach – Not a true spinach but used as a spinach substitute. Red is more popular than the Green variety. Malabar Spinach is rich in vitamins A, C and B-complex.

Summer Greens – Egyptian Spinach – Also called Molokhia, Saluyot or Jew's Mallow, this middle-eastern super green is widely used for its leafy and nutritious greens, both cooked and raw.

Hibiscus sabdariffa – call it Jamaica, Roselle or Gongura, it is a popular beverage in many countries and a powerful and frequently-used medicinal herb, and a powerful diuretic. It loves full sun and can grow three to five feet high and wide over the summer. A healthy plant will be loaded with calyxes, the leaves are also used in West African cuisine and other cultures. It is also often used as a natural dye. The plant is very attractive.

Moringa oleifera – Moringa trees can grow 18 ft in less than six months and love our hot summer sun. Nearly every part of Moringa is edible and highly nutritious.

Jerusalem Artichokes – A delicious vegetable alternative, also called "Sunchoke", these tubers thrive in our hot desert summers, and can be invasive if not managed.

Ashwagandha – The roots and berries of this plant are commonly used in natural and Ayurvedic medicines, and the leaves are often juiced.

Pichuberry – Also known as the Cape Gooseberry, this plant can be a challenge to grow here as it prefers a more tropical climate, but several folks have grown it successfully and it remains a popular edible garden addition.

Well-known Summer Edibles

All Basil varieties – Basils thrive in our long hot summers, provided they are kept evenly moist. Basils do not like to dry out in full sun, and may even do better with a bit of afternoon shade or 40% shade cloth.

Eggplant – Eggplants can take full sun if established early in the season. Morning or afternoon shade would be best if established later in the season. Healthy eggplant can survive for more than two seasons, over summer, into spring and beyond.

Peppers – Pepper transplants require 40% shade cloth or natural afternoon shade to thrive and produce a fall into winter crop. Many pepper plants will survive for more than two seasons.

Tomatoes – Most tomato transplants don't survive into summer but there is always the exception! There is a second growing season for tomatoes here starting mid-July but that is a whole separate discussion.

Okra – Red Burgundy does extremely well here but all varieties can take our full summer sun.

Sunflowers – Start sunflowers from seed before the summer heat kicks in for heat-tolerant beauty all summer long.

Sweet Potato Transplants – Nurseries often carry Sweet Potato transplants, you can order them online or snip some from a friend's garden.

Tomatillos – Usually planted from transplants in the spring, tomatillos do well in morning sun and afternoon shade.

Beans, Cucumbers, Pumpkins, Summer & Winter Squash and Melons and Watermelons – These crops are all planted in the spring and summer and while they do best when planted from seed, transplants can do very well too.

Find these notes online at: www.vilardigardens.com

Your Egyptian Spinach seeds: This Middle Eastern super-green, known as Jew's mallow or Egyptian spinach, has a high vitamin and mineral content. This "food of kings" dates back to the time of the pharaohs, when an Egyptian king drank it in soup to recover from an illness. Today, it's one of the most widely eaten vegetables in Egypt.

Sow seeds in warm weather ¼" deep in rich soil and keep evenly watered. Plants can grow 4-6 feet high and about four feet wide, and thrive in full sun. This annual will go to seed in cool weather.

Sources for Edible Garden Tours

Jake Mace, The Vegan Athlete – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ArizonaGarden/>

Sweet Life Garden – Jill Green of Sweet Life Garden organizes the Arcadia Edible Garden Tour. This year's tour is Saturday May 13th. Check her website or Facebook page for more information.

<http://www.sweetlifegarden.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/Sweet-Life-Garden-142421842460933/>

Epic Yard Farm – <https://www.facebook.com/epicyardfarm/>

Greg Peterson – The Urban Farm: www.urbanfarm.org

Sources for growing calendars:

The University of Arizona Cooperative Extension –

<https://extension.arizona.edu/sites/extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az1005.pdf>

The Urban Farm –

<https://urbanfarm.leadpages.net/planting-calendar/>

For more information on Organic food:

www.organic.org

Facebook Gardening Groups –

Organic Desert Gardeners of Maricopa County – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/117349221754832/>

Desert Gardeners Marketplace –

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/942262129129464/>

Low Desert Caper Growers –

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1630193597228778/>

Vilardi Gardens on Facebook –

<https://www.facebook.com/Vilardi-Gardens-148632058518894/>

Sources for Sweet Potato slips –

Baker Creek Rare Seeds - <http://www.rareseeds.com/store/vegetables/live-plants/?idevd=5E9D0E263B2911E2B3838A296288709B&idevm=facec9f755e54b3fb78d47bcf4ef5f87&idev mid=361485>

Tatorman – <https://www.tatorman.com/>