



Toronto
Green
Community

SELECTING PLANTS

Once you've decided what crops you'd like to grow this year, you need to consider which varieties suit you best. All vegetables come in a wide range of colours, sizes, flavours, and types suited to different growing conditions. Two important considerations are space (how big the plant is going to get, both above and below ground) and climate (especially how long your growing season will be). One plant that illustrates this well is tomatoes (see box), as the concerns of variety and growing season are relevant for all crops.

Another important consideration is whether to grow from seed or start with **seedlings**. Growing from seed is an excellent way to learn about and be in control of the growth of your plants from start to finish. In addition, it's much more cost effective: 30 cucumber seeds or 100 beet seeds sell for about \$3.00, and if you save seeds you can supply your own year after year. When choosing your seeds try to go with **heritage** or **heirloom** varieties whenever possible as these types are often adapted to your local climate and have been saved for years because of their taste or nutritional value. If you plan to save seeds, open-pollinated varieties are a must, as many hybrid seeds (the kind sold by many large seed vendors) will often be sterile or not produce the variety you expect.

Seed packets provide specific dates and details about planting, including depth for seeds and necessary sun exposure. Some seeds, like lettuce and beans, can be planted directly into the garden once the soil warms up. Other more delicate plants, like tomatoes, eggplant and peppers, need to be started indoors, about 6-8 weeks before the last frost date (the last day the ground is expected to freeze). This year, the **last frost date in Toronto is May 9**, it changes each year but can be easily looked up online.

Starting seedlings requires heat and water that are both consistent and abundant. If you don't have a sunny window that stays around 20°C overnight, it's best to move your seedlings on top of the fridge once the sun goes down – the amount of heat it emits is just right for promoting germination. In fact, until the seedlings form leaves, heat is more important than light, and seedlings can be left on the fridge or in another warm place constantly. Moisture and wind are also important when starting seedlings. Try to maintain high humidity by covering seedlings with a clear plastic dome or a plastic bag. Ensure air circulation by cutting a few holes in any covering to prevent rot or damping off. When your seedlings begin to grow, it can be very helpful to train a light fan on them, encouraging the stalks to strengthen early.

Make sure to keep note of what seeds you plant in which pots or rows of the seeding tray – new sprouts all look very similar until they grow their second set of leaves, called **true leaves**, and you'll want to know what's sprouting where. Once they are about 10cm tall and the temperature is right, your seedlings need to be hardened off before being planted outside. **Hardening off** is a process to get your plants used to being outside, and to prevent them from going into shock over the weather change. It's simple: take them out for a few hours on the first day, then gradually leave them out longer and longer, until at the end of the week they should be ready to be planted out.

If you're choosing to grow flowers instead of plants, consider what varieties will do best in your situation. Choose plants that are suited to your light levels, many beautiful flowers do best in part shade. Consider growing native flowers and plants in your decorative gardens. These plants thrive in southern Ontario's soil and climate as they evolved here, generally require less water and are excellent for attracting butterflies and other pollinators. Find out what season the plants bloom and choose a variety to ensure blooms from spring to fall. Check out the links below for native plant ideas for your garden!

North American Native Plant Catalogue: <http://www.nanps.org/plant/plantlist.aspx>

Ontario Wildflowers: <http://www.ontariowildflowers.com/>

COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	SUN REQUIEREMENT	NOTES
Morning Glory	<i>Convolvulus tricolor</i>	Full Sun	Pinch off spent flowers to encourage continued growth. Seeds poisonous if eaten
Dahlia	<i>Dahlia</i>	Full Sun	Scraggly growth indicates insufficient light. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers as they encourage growth of leaves instead of flowers.
Grape Hyacinth	<i>Muscari armeniacum</i>	Full Sun	Short spring bloomer requires little to no summer water.
Petunia	<i>Petunia</i>	Full Sun	Easy to grow. Remove faded blooms and seedpods to encourage bushy growth.
Daylilies	<i>Hemerocallis</i>	Full Sun to Part Shade	Flower colour fades in full sun. Pair with spring flowering bulbs for colour from spring through summer.
Nicotiana	<i>Nicotiana</i>	Full Sun to Part Shade	Hybrid plants tend to have no fragrance.
Geranium	<i>Pelargonium</i>	Full Sun to Part Shade	Plant in fast-draining soil and allow to dry out between waterings.
Marigold	<i>Tagetes</i>	Full Sun to Part Shade	Water soil directly instead of overhead watering. Fragrant varieties excellent to repel a wide range of pests.
Periwinkle	<i>Vinca major</i>	Part Shade	Keep soil moist, provide additional water if in a sunny spot.
Pansy	<i>Viola wittrockiana</i>	Part Shade	Remove faded flowers often, may droop or stop blooming in hot weather, if so cut back by half.
Rhododendron	<i>Rhododendron</i>	Part Shade	Acid fertilizer in spring before and after flowering. Shallow rooted, prefers rainwater to tap water.
Wax Begonia	<i>Begonia semperflorens</i>	Part Shade	Bring indoors before frost for a winter houseplant

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