Have you made plans for your vegetable garden yet? If you are like me then you have not even thought about it, or maybe you are ahead of the game and have some cold hardy crops in the ground. For this area, April 15 is considered to be the frost date, or the last probable date for a killing frost. The wonderful weather that began in February and hung on until this past weekend has had a lot of people fooled. This week’s weather forecast has many in the horticulture industry a little nervous. From the strawberry growers to the nursery growers, everyone is wondering when, and if, we will have a hard freeze. From the time I write this and the time you read this, the weather forecasters are indicating a hard freeze. So only time will tell. But please do not let this crazy weather put a damper on your vegetable gardening plans!

There are many things to consider when designing your vegetable garden, but let us just go over a few of the basics. Planting times, soil requirements, light requirements, water requirements, and harvesting.

Planting time – For those of you that got a little too excited by all the nice weather, you may be replanting next week if you are not careful. When you decide what you want to plant, check on the package when you should plant for your specific area. If the package does not give a good indication of planting time, check out the “Home Vegetable Gardening” facts sheet from Extension. Most of your summer crops such as squash, zucchini, tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, etc. should be planted sometime around April 15 for this area, but remember that different varieties of one vegetable may have markedly different planting dates. Make sure you follow all of the instructions for planting time, depth, and water needs.

Soil requirements – Plants are picky, especially vegetables! Most vegetables prefer a soil with a pH of somewhere around 6.0 to 6.5. The soils here in Robeson County tend to be between a pH of 4.5 and 5.5. If your soil pH is too low, it will limit the nutrient availability for the plants. Take a tomato for instance; if the pH is too low, the tomato will develop blossom end rot, which is caused by a calcium deficiency. But adding calcium will not help the problem unless you raise the pH to make the calcium available to the plant. So make sure you have your soil tested before you start planting. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services will test any North Carolina residents’ soil for free. Just call the Extension office and we can get you set up with instructions and boxes to send off.

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Light Requirements – When it comes to light most vegetable plants are created equal! They all need a maximum amount of sunlight to produce. The key is to make good use of your planting area by placing tall or climbing plants with trellises on the north or west side of the garden. This helps to avoid shading out the smaller plants. Also, consider running your rows from north to south to avoid shading from side to side.

Water Requirements – You cannot grow a high yielding vegetable garden without supplemental irrigation. If we lived in Florida and it rained every afternoon, this might not be the case. But, here we are, in Robeson County, and we need to provide our vegetable crops with plenty of water. Most watering should happen early in the morning before the sun gets too high. This prevents evaporation. Plants that are close to their harvest time will usually take more water also. Your garden should be checked at least once in the morning and once in the afternoon to ensure adequate water supply.

Harvest – Consider the harvest time when you are planting your crops. Plant things with similar harvest times close together, so that you can utilize that space to replant after harvest.

There are tons of gardening layouts available. There is even software available to purchase. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this or any other horticulture topic, please do not hesitate to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.