

Basic Dry Gardening

Site: Ideal is a native soil with some moisture retention. Soil depth matters – shallow raised beds or underlying rock or similar impervious materials will limit or eliminate options for dry gardening. Raised beds and mounds dry faster, sunken areas hold water longer. Some protection from dry winds a plus.

Preparation: Cut and work cover crop as early as possible, and 10-15 days before planting. Consider breaking soil deeper with a broadfork. Incorporate plenty of organic material. Rotating with a fallow year or an irrigated year can be beneficial.

Planting: Space individual plants twice as far as normal. Plant slightly deeper than recommended depth. Plant as early as practical for the site and crop. Pre-soak large seeds such as beans, corn, squash, and melon. “Mud in” by pre-watering just before planting, or by watering heavily one time just after planting.

Feeding: Fertilize with long lasting fertilizer at planting, follow-up feedings are less successful on dry soil. Lime calcium-hungry crops (tomatoes, squash) thoroughly pre-plant or at planting.

Weed Control: Critical to eliminate competition. “Dust mulch” by hoeing or cultivating the soil surrounding the crop plants, including any very young weeds, into a loose crumb and then raking to mulch around the crop. Weed very regularly – it will slow down as the summer progresses.

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Crop Selection

Tomatoes: Most popular crop, and one of the easiest. Broadly, the criteria are thicker skin, shorter days to harvest, smaller fruit, and indeterminate. Specific varieties with known tolerance: Sweet 100, Early Girl, Pineapple, Cherokee Purple, Sungold, Stupice. Very heavy yielding, determinate, and very large fruited varieties have exhibited substantial blossom end blight problems.

Peppers: Most are suitable, notable varieties include Anaheim, Jalapeno, Habanero, Cayenne, Shishito, Sweet Italian Roasting, Carmen, Jimmy Nardello.

Beans: Dry shelling beans are well suited. Green beans: bush beans with quick harvest cycles (under 60 days) have worked well for me.

Squash: Summer squash or winter, all will work. In my garden, zucchini has been the single most exceptional crop.

Melons: All varieties I have tried have worked; fruit is smaller but prolific and flavorful. Watermelon: shortest possible harvest cycle is strongly recommended. Other melons: honeydews, Charentais, cantaloupe, and muskmelon of several varieties have all worked for me. Remember to lime these too!

Potatoes: All are suitable, shorter harvest cycle perform better. Late and moderately late storage varieties (such as Russet Burbank) don't size as well but often have fewer storage problems.

Carrots: Imperator and Danvers types have done well from spring planting; remember to thin more aggressively for better harvest size.

Corn: Haven't done these myself, but pretty good overall data from other sources. Shorter harvest cycles are best bet; dent corn easier than sweet corn.

Leaf Crops: Kale – Nero di Toscana (Dinosaur Kale) has been a stunning success, well worth trying others. Chard – yield suffers, but will work.

Sweet Potato: Varieties less than 100 days do pretty well. Balancing act between waiting for the soil to warm up but still getting them in early enough to benefit from the late spring rains. Yields noticeably lower.