

Select Vegetable Seeds: Check Days to Maturity



By, Bonnie Turnbull, UCCE Master Gardener of Lake Tahoe

Outside everything thing is white, but you are dreaming of your summer garden. So you find the website of a national seed seller or open a glossy catalog. So many delicious, nutritious vegetables to grow! They all hold such promise.

You check out the carrots.

22 kinds? All so beautiful. It takes a while to click through each description, but you narrow it down to 2 choices.

Carrot, Kaleidoscope Blend: Our exclusive blend of wild colors!

We've combined five distinct colors of carrots in one special blend for a pretty rainbow effect that is sure to be noticed at the dinner table, even by the kids. After testing hundreds of carrot varieties, we developed this easy-to-grow mix of five crispy carrots: Atomic Red, Bambino, Cosmic Purple, Lunar White and Solar Yellow. Smoothly tapered roots grow to 8" x 2" in loose soil.

and

Carrot, Mokum Hybrid: Early variety keeps sweet flavor even in warm weather.

The carrot of carrots. We favor the flavor of this juicy, sweet-tasting, early to-rise carrot. Excellent choice for homemade baby food and juices, full-flavored 'Mokum' is very tasty indeed—both as a baby carrot or as full-size 6-8" taste treat. Short-topped, nearly coreless early variety, with attractive, slender roots, retains sweet flavor even in warm weather.

Multi-color carrots sound like terrific fun.

But then you drill down to detail and learn that your first Mokum carrots will mature in 56 days, while Kaleidoscope carrots will take up to 80-- an extra month before harvesting.

Next, you check out the lettuce. Some mature in as few as 40 days while others take 90—over twice as long.

And tomatoes? They mature between 50 and 90 days. Big difference.

Does it really matter?

Here in Tahoe, absolutely.

Two temperature factors limit our vegetable growing season.

1. Frost

Historically, we have been, on average, frost-free between June 19 and September 18 -- about 3 months. However, we have had frosts as late as July 6 and as early as August 28—which could shorten our growing season to 2 months or about 60 days.

2. Average daily temperature

May: Average high (day) temperature 57° F. Average low (night) 35° F.

The average air temperature is just 46° F.

As for the rest of summer:

June: high 66° / low 43° Average 54° F.

July: high 74° / low 50° Average 62° F

August: high 75° / low 50° Average 62° F

September: high 67° / low 45° Average 56° F

Compare that to optimal growing temperatures.

Carrots: 60 - 70 ° F.

Lettuce: 60 - 70°F.

Tomatoes: 70 - 80°F day/60 ° - 65°F night

We have about 2 months within the optimal average temperature range for lettuce and carrots, but it is in the lower part of the range. The average temperature is never optimal for tomatoes.

In other locations with more moderate nighttime temperatures, vegetables will continue to grow at night. The wide temperature swings between hot days and cool nights stress her in Tahoe many vegetables, and in the case of tomatoes (and other warm season vegetables), can interfere with pollen formation and fruit ripening. So in Tahoe, plant maturation will take longer than advertised by sellers.

So when shopping for seeds:

1. Choose seeds with fewer days to maturity. Keep in mind that “maturity” only means when the first plant/fruit is ready for harvest and the harvest season will extend beyond that day.
2. Save time and shop with growers who specialize in short season crops. Look for “high altitude seeds” or “short season seeds”. Shop with growers located in northern states or mountain areas. Then you will not have to check through 22 kinds of carrots to find ones that will do best in your garden!

For more tips:

Short Season Vegetable Gardening

<https://www.cals.uidaho.edu/edcomm/pdf/PNW/PNW0497.pdf>