

A place in the sun: A few hours enough for some veggies

When people find out I have an interest in gardening they often ask if I have a vegetable garden. My usual response has been, “No, I have too much shade.” Well, after researching some gardening books, reviewing garden blogs, and consulting with other Master Gardeners, I decided to give it a try. While there are many fruits and vegetables that require full sun, there are still numerous choices for a part sun or part shade location. Full, deep shade will not work — unless you like to eat moss — but most of us have a few spots in the garden that are sunny for part of the day.

The first step is scouting out the best location. Determining how much sun a particular spot gets during a day is not easy. Perhaps it starts out with full shade in the morning, then shifts to the dappled shade from a pine tree, and then has two hours of full sun at the end of the day. How many hours of sun are you getting? You clearly have two hours of full sun, but the dappled shade counts for something too. Also, you may have some light being reflected off a brightly painted building. It all adds up.

There are things you can do to increase the amount of light in your garden. Removing a tree or two is one option, but you need to consider the value of the tree. If it is a struggling dogwood tree, then take it out. If it is a giant healthy oak tree, don't you dare. Another option is to remove some of the lower branches, allowing in more light. You may also have enough light under deciduous trees to grow winter vegetables.

In the end you may have to experiment with the placement of your vegetable garden. Before building permanent raised beds, you might plant some vegetables in an earth box or other container. If it does not work, you can try another location. Also, consider planting vegetables with your ornamental plants if you have a sunny front yard. My wife and I have grown decorative peppers, chard and kale in containers at our front entry way.

What vegetables and herbs grow in part sun?

Salad greens. Leaf lettuce, arugula, endive, spinach, mustard greens, collards, and cress actually do better with a little shade. In full sun they can scorch and bolt sooner. With some shade you will be able to harvest a few weeks longer. Spinach and mustard greens should be harvested as babies for your salads. Three to four hours of sun should be fine.

Broccoli and cauliflower. Full sun for broccoli and cauliflower may cause rapid growth while part sun encourages tighter heads and slower flowering, which can improve the taste. Five or six hours of sun should work.

Herbs. Many culinary herbs require full sun, but chives, cilantro, garlic chives, marjoram, lemon balm, mint, oregano and parsley are reported to perform well in part sun. They will need at least three hours of sun.

Peas and beans. If you get four to five hours of sun each day you can try peas and beans, but getting a good harvest may take a little longer. Bush and dwarf varieties are often recommended over the pole varieties.

Root vegetables. Carrots, beets, potatoes, radishes and turnips will do fine with some shade, but it may take a little longer to get a full crop. Four to five hours of sun should be enough for a reasonable production. Remember, small carrots and new potatoes can be a gourmet treat that would be costly at the grocery store.

Onions and scallions. These crops do well with at least three hours of sun per day.

Tomatoes. Tomatoes are usually not mentioned for part sun conditions, but I have had success with vining, indeterminate tomatoes (like the Sungold variety) under the filtered shade of tall pine trees with just two hours of direct sun. Experiment, it may work for you.

The hours of sun mentioned above are recommendations based on the experience of other gardeners. You may find you need a little more or a little less sun to get good results. Since you are pushing the envelope sun-wise, make sure you start with good, well drained soil and plenty of quality compost and organic fertilizer. Do not let a little shade stop you from enjoying garden-fresh vegetables and herbs.

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