

## How I got started in gardening

As with most gardeners, I was born with dirt under my nails and a green thumb. When my father helped me plant my first garden next to the playhouse, it was a natural thing. I watched with delight as he made a watering can by punching holes with a hammer and a nail in the bottom of a No. 16 food can. This was *way* more fun than playing with dolls! I was hooked and the love of gardening never went away. During high school, gardening was one of those after-school activities that kept me out of trouble and talking to my parents. Living in the South, one was able to garden outdoors during the school year. It was then that I dreamed of becoming a pumpkin grower.

Putting childhood aside, I went away to college at Louisiana State University to pursue a career in teaching. But that was not my destiny. The agricultural classes I took as electives turned into my major. I graduated with a degree in horticulture or growing plants for commercial production. Life has a way of opening all sorts of doors you cannot anticipate, and before I knew it, I was on my way to Alaska for a short summer vacation. Once here, there was no going back. I had found paradise.

I planted my first garden in Alaska in 1974 and *what* garden it was! The 14-pound turnip was like a fairy tale. Seeing how turnips were my favorite food I decided to never leave. Since then, my passion for gardening has never waned. Although there are many challenges to gardening in the Far North, there are also many rewards. Cold soils and the short growing season can reduce the varieties of crops. But long day lengths allow Alaska gardeners to grow vegetables such as the Shogun broccoli to 14 inches in diameter in just three months time.

As with most Alaska residents, I have held many different jobs throughout the last 28 years. Working for the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service as the Land Resources Agent has been the most rewarding job. As part of this job, I teach gardening classes, have a gardening TV spot, and answer a lot of gardening questions. From time to time, I get to visit a local garden.

Alaska gardeners, on the whole, are very innovative. I hope to share some of what I have learned and seen through this garden column. I would also like to hear from you via e-mail. If you have gardening questions, comments or stories to share please contact me at [michelesgardenak@yahoo.com](mailto:michelesgardenak@yahoo.com).

My garden tip for you this week is to encourage you to start a garden journal and begin ordering seeds. Go through garden magazines or seed catalogs and clip out great color combinations, plants, and seed suggestions. Fill the journal with these new ideas. Take notes from the articles that you read on better ways to water, compost, fertilize, and plant.

Seed catalogs have begun to arrive in the mail. If you need copies, the World Wide Web is a good source. Most seed companies will mail you their catalogs for free with just a call. There are a few reliable companies that Interior gardeners use frequently—Burgess

Seed, Burpee, Denali, Johnny's, Park Seed, Stokes, Territorial, and Vessey. These companies provide varieties for northern latitudes.

There are two characteristics that gardeners should look for when selecting varieties to improve success. First, look for ones that mature early. For example, some varieties of sweet corn mature or ripen 100 days after planting. Other varieties mature in 55. Obviously, an Alaska gardener will have more success with the variety of corn that matures in just 55 days. Another characteristic to look for is resistance to bolting. Bolting is when a crop, such as spinach, produces flowers and seed instead of edible leaves.

Seed types can also be selected for intended use. Individuals entering vegetable in the state fair can select varieties for their large size. Varieties such as O-S Cross cabbage and Shogun broccoli have the potential to utilize the sun and grow to champion sizes. If winter storage is desired, it is best to select a late maturing variety.

Seed catalogs can be a great wealth of information on plant selections. Another source is the "Recommended Variety List for Interior Alaska" which is available at the Cooperative Extension Service. It lists vegetable varieties that have been successful in trials and evaluation at the University and with local gardeners. This publication is free and can be picked up at the office at Room 138, 1000 University Ave. Till next week, happy hunting in those seed catalogs!