

Here are 5 things every gardener should plant this summer.

Nancy Ngo, Pioneer Press

Updated: 05/13/2009 05:17:58 PM CDT

Gardening is expected to be huge this year. People are trying to get more bang for their buck, so investing in herbs and vegetables that will grow bountifully for months is a great way to stretch a few dollars.

At Linder's garden center on West Larpenteur Avenue in St. Paul, seed and vegetable sales are up more than 10 percent compared with this time last year. Jeff Farrington, assistant manager of the 100-year-old spot, says Linder's is seeing a lot of new faces this year.

"They're coming in and asking questions," he says. "They want to know how to start a garden or how to grow tomatoes, cucumbers and beans."

Not everyone is born with a green thumb, and a Minnesota growing season can be harsh. So, it's best to have a strategy to make sure your garden maximizes its full potential.

Here, Julie Weisenhorn, director of the University of Minnesota Master Gardener program, comes to the rescue with this list of five things even a beginning gardener can grow.

SWEET BASIL

Why: The annual herb produces large, fragrant leaves that are full of flavor for making pesto and adding to salads and pasta dishes.

Growing tips: Sow by seed or transplant seedlings into the ground in spring. The best place to grow basil is a spot that gets at least six hours of sun daily. To start another growth spurt, pinch off flowers. To harvest, cut the stems back to a node, the point on the stem right before the leaves emerge.

Peak season: Early July to late September

POLE BEANS

Why: Pole beans are a great choice for introducing kids to gardening. They germinate in a matter of days, and their growth can be observed almost daily. They also provide a great opportunity to create vertical height in an otherwise flat garden. Pole beans are a good source of nutrients and fiber.

Growing tips: Sow seeds annually directly into well-drained (preferably organic) soil in late May or early June. (Sowing too early may result in rotten bean seeds.) To get beans to climb, use a trellis, wire fencing or poles. Pick the beans when young and tender.

Peak season: Early July to late September

NASTURTIUMS (EDIBLE FLOWERS)

Why: Ranging from orange to deep red, nasturtiums not only make great ornamental flowers but also are edible. Their peppery flavor tastes great in salads and soups. Because they have few insect or disease issues, they grow easily.

Growing tips: Grow annually in the ground or on a trellis where they get six or more hours of sun daily. Pick them when young; older leaves can be bitter.

Peak season: Early May to late August

MINT

Why: Mint sprouts like wildflowers and comes back every spring.

Growing tips: Mint can be aggressive — even invasive — in a garden, so confine it to a container, buried or above ground. To harvest, snip just below the leaves and use in drinks, salads and other dishes.

Peak season: Early July to late September

CARROTS

Why: An annual, carrots are easy to grow and can be harvested well into late fall.

Growing tips: Soil preparation is key when growing healthy carrots. Dig soil deep and loose so carrots have room to spread. Do not fertilize.

Peak season: Early August to late November

GENERAL GROWING TIPS

- **Plan ahead.** Plot your garden using string, labels and stakes before planting so you'll have enough space for everything to grow.
- **Mulch.** Use wood mulch over planting beds to retain moisture and help control weeds.
- **Water.** The soil should have enough water to stay moist for extended periods of time.
- **Get advice.** Ask questions when you shop at your local garden store. Also, check out the University of Minnesota Master Gardener booth at the St. Paul Farmers' Market on weekends or go to extension.umn.edu/gardeninfo.