

Estes Valley Gardening: We're not in Iowa Anymore

By Claire Hanson

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Have you loved gardening somewhere else, and now you want a garden in your new high-elevation paradise? Sounds daunting? Don't despair -- knowing about just a few challenges can help you make sound crop choices and adapt techniques you know for good results here in the mountains.

Not being a Master Gardener, I asked Alison O'Connor, Horticultural Agent for Colorado State University Extension in Larimer County, to collaborate. She added additional details and made sure I wouldn't be leading you astray. Based on her knowledge and expertise plus my observations growing veggies at Estes Valley Community Garden since its inception, this should be good start to "transplant" your gardening experience.

You've probably discovered the dry air here is very hard on human skin. Makes sense that it is also very tough on plants that are not natives – i.e. most veggies and a lot of the flowers you might want to grow. Combining this low relative humidity with frequent strong winds, more intense sunshine (especially ultraviolet) at elevation, and the generally gravel-y, quick-draining soils in the Estes Valley, plants dry out very fast, and the soil surface does too.

Regularly monitor plant and soil conditions to be sure watering is neither too little nor too much. Use mulch or add organic matter (compost is good) to help retain moisture. Always check the root zone moisture level by probing the soil before watering. Just because the surface is dry doesn't necessarily mean the roots are thirsty.

One bright spot: insect problems here are not usually as destructive as they can be in other climates. If you notice a few bugs you can usually pinch or wash them off and not see any significant damage. A larger infestation of, say, flea beetles or aphids will look alarming, but often they dwindle and disappear on their own after a bit and don't actually destroy the host crop. Removing damaged leaves encourages new growth, and often the yield will not suffer. CSU Extension has tons of information and advice, if you encounter worrisome insects in your garden.

Perhaps the most critical differences at this elevation are the shorter growing season and the generally cool nights, even at the height of summer. Choose crops based on the time to harvest (best are 80 days or less) and what might be termed "hardiness." Look for these terms in seed catalogs: "reliable in cool weather", "cold-tolerant", "easy to grow", "vigorous", "productive" and "great flavor". Expect tomatoes and peppers, especially, to require coddling plus luck – they can be grown but you'll need to seek specific how-to advice.

Keep in mind that, historically, last frost can be in early to mid-June, and first frost in early September or perhaps even in August although that is not very likely. And know that for best seed germination, soil temperature (at 4" depth) should be at least 40 degrees – at our elevation the soil is slower to warm in spring than you might expect.

Some reliable crops for high-elevation gardens:

- Leafy greens - lettuces, arugula, kale, spinach, Swiss chard, collards, cabbage, endive, radicchio.
- Root crops - carrots, beets, radishes, turnips, kohlrabi, rutabaga, potatoes, leeks.
- Other veggies - peas, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts.
- Herbs - French tarragon, horseradish, chives. Parsley, cilantro, dill, calendula, borage can be direct-seeded. Sage, thyme, oregano, rosemary, bay laurel can be grown in pots and brought indoors for winter. Basil might need protection from cool night temperatures and winds; consider growing in a pot in warm sunny location and moving indoors at night.

These are just a few starting points as you plan your new garden here in the Estes Valley. Ask questions— extension.colostate.edu is a great starting point— and don't be afraid to experiment.

Claire learned to grow veggies in her mom's backyard "farm" in New Jersey. She loves growing salad greens, and is on the EVCG Board. Visit evcg.org for information about Estes Valley Community Garden.

Are you interested in becoming a Master Gardener through CSU Extension? Colorado Master Gardeners volunteer to help extend research-based gardening information to the public in a variety of venues. To learn more, please contact Alison O'Connor at astoven@larimer.org or 970-498-6000.