



HIGH ALTITUDE GARDENING

By: Jacki Hein

Quite a few Coloradans make their homes at higher altitudes even than the Mile High City. Life at 8,000' or 9,000' offers a unique opportunity to live in the foothills or mountains and commune with nature. Snow is not unusual, though, even in June! For the devoted gardener, the shorter season encountered at higher elevations can make gardening an ongoing challenge.

There are microclimates to be found in any setting and the mountains are no exception. A south-facing slope can offer a longer season than a north-facing one, and gullies and low areas work well for accumulating more moisture. While there is more precipitation at higher elevations, in the thinner air, water evaporates more quickly.

Like gardens at lower elevations, amending soil is one of the keys to gardening success. There is no great natural gardening soil in Colorado, but by adding organic amendments such as compost or sphagnum peat over the years, one can eventually be achieved. Be sure, too, to add a mulch on top of the soil to help retain moisture and to moderate soil temperature fluctuations.

With a shorter growing season, more cold tolerant veggies, or those that ripen their harvest in a shorter amount of time, are certainly the way to go. For cold tolerance, look to things like lettuce, spinach, radishes, peas, carrots, beets and anything in the cabbage family. They'll happily sail right through occasional freezing temperatures without batting an eye. Tomatoes aren't totally out of the question, either. Varieties like Fourth of July will begin ripening fruit after just 44 days, and a local favorite even at lower elevations, Early Girl, isn't far behind with 55. And, of course, zucchini will yield its dependable abundance of produce given a warm location and adequate moisture.

Mountain gardeners quickly learn what they can and can't grow. As with any gardening, trial and error are the best teachers. Don't be afraid to experiment. Every location is different and you may find just the right spot for a fabulous garden!