

SUCCESSIONAL CROPPING

The idea of successional cropping of any vegetable is to make several successive plantings of that particular crop, usually at planned intervals, to ensure that the crop is available for harvest over a longer period than would have been the case if only one planting was made.

In home or community gardens, where the main aim is to produce crops for own use, making several plantings of each crop has obvious benefits.

A market gardener will generally try to produce a range of crops, each over as long a period as possible, in order to offer his customers a large choice of products, throughout the year if possible.

Even a farmer who grows only one or two different crops, often on a large scale, will benefit by making successive plantings. This reduces the risk of serious crop loss through natural causes such as hail, and also of economic losses should the crop be harvested during a period of very low prices. By spreading the harvest over a longer period - the result of successional cropping - only a portion of the total crop may be at risk at any one time. For example, in a frost-prone area a tomato grower may make three or four plantings over the period September to December, for a continuous supply of fruit from about December to May. In such a case a hailstorm in October or April, or low prices in March, would affect only a portion of the crop.

To ensure a continuous supply of a particular vegetable over a long period, planning of the plantings is essential. The climate will determine over which periods it is possible to grow the various crops. A knowledge of climatic requirements of the crop, as well as the time taken to reach the harvest stage, the length of the harvesting period, the holding ability in the land, the storage ability, and similar factors, is required in order to plan successfully.

Crops with a relatively short harvesting period, such as lettuce or bush green beans, may need to be planted every two weeks or so for a continuous supply of the vegetable. Others, with a longer cropping period, such as runner green beans, carrots or cabbages, could be planted at about monthly intervals. For crops with a long picking season, like brinjals or chillies, only one or two plantings may be necessary for many months of harvesting.

Each grower should decide which crops are required for sale or own use. For commercial production those crops for which there is a ready sale should be grown. Crops such as cabbages, potatoes and tomatoes are used in large quantities, and large areas can be, and are, planted annually. With other crops, such as green peppers, monthly sales on the Durban market may only be about 30 tons; at a yield of 30 tons per hectare only about 12 hectares of green peppers, spread over the year between all producers, will satisfy this demand, so large plantings are not advisable.

For commercial production, advance planning is essential, and this includes the method of marketing the crop. If the grower has arranged to sell the crop through an outlet other than the agents on national markets, the retailer or other end user of the crop (such as hotels or caterers) is more likely to remain a satisfied customer who would be prepared to pay reasonable prices, if he were fairly sure of being supplied over an extended period. A crop which is only available for a short period results in the buyer having to look for other suppliers of the product. For own use, the area planted to a crop at any one time may vary, depending on the needs of the individual grower. However, it may also be affected by the range of other crops available at the same time. For example, if only cabbages are available, a family may need five or six heads a week. However, if one is at the same time harvesting other vegetables - beetroot,

carrot, cauliflower, onion, pumpkin, swiss chard and tomato - possibly only one cabbage would be sufficient for the family. Other factors, such as size of available land and water supply, labour needs of the crop and its availability and size of the market or the household, will obviously also affect the size of each planting , as well as the interval between plantings.