Gardening season is almost upon us. Now is the best time to plan your garden so you can maximize the nutritional value and healing properties of your favorite fruits and vegetables.

Plants are in the history of virtually every medicine known to humankind and some of them, because of their simplicity and low cost, can actually help prevent and manage some difficult health conditions safely and without side effects.

I’m going to list a few of my favorites here. I’ll bet you are already planning to grow them or buy them at the Farmers’ Market. Even if you have a tiny garden or just a few pots on a deck or windowsill, you can make a significant impact on your health.

1. **Tomatoes:** A great source of vitamins C, A and K, perhaps the most significant benefit of having tomatoes on your dinner table often comes from lycopene, a member of the carotenoid family, that has been clinically proven to protect against colorectal adenomas, a precursor of colon cancer and reduce the risk of prostate cancer. Tomatoes are wonderful when eaten raw, but to release that all-important lycopene, they must be cooked, so their health benefits are still available to us in the form of sauces and preserved tomatoes during the winter months.

2. **Garlic and onions:** These summer vegetables usually winter over in our area, so take advantage of lots of garlic in your food now to boost your immune system, prevent and treat colds and flu and put the damper on the spring allergies we all know are just around the corner. Quercetin, a major antioxidant in garlic and onions, is known for its immune boosting properties and as a natural antihistamine.

3. **Peppers:** All kinds: mild, sweet or hot and even those give-me-a-fire-extinguisher varieties in green, red, yellow and orange are well known sources of antioxidants like vitamin C, lowering the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes. In addition, peppers’ rich supply of B vitamins lowers homocysteine, a chemical associated with increased risk of heart attack and stroke. And those hotter varieties are a great source of capsaicin an anti-inflammatory substance that can reduce all kinds of pain, including arthritis and back pain.

4. **Broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, cabbage:** This family, known as cruciferous vegetables, may be some of the most nutrient dense foods on the planet. There is a wealth of research on the healing powers of the cruciferous veggies, including folates to prevent birth defects and miscarriages, glucosinolate phytonutrients that help detoxify your body, fiber to lower cholesterol, kaempferol to lessen the effects of allergies, indole-3 carbinols to prevent a variety of cancers, including breast cancer, sulforaphane to prevent ulcers caused by bacteria and lutein and zeaxanthin for eye health. Best of all, research shows that as little as half a cup a day gives you all the nutrient protection you need.

5. **Blueberries:** If you don’t already have blueberry bushes, plan a grip into the Pisgah National Forest in July and August when wild blueberries are ready for an abundant harvest. If you’re lucky enough to have your own bushes (they grow almost anywhere), you can walk right out into your garden and eat your breakfast or dessert out of hand. Blueberries are among the most powerful antioxidants --
protecting against the diseases of aging—known to science. They have far more heart protective anthocyanins than red grapes and wine, their ellagic acid has been scientifically proven to block the metabolic pathways that lead to several types of cancer and they help protect the brain from aged-related conditions like Alzheimer’s and dementia and their fiber helps relieve both constipation and diarrhea.

Get on your gardening gloves and get ready to plant! You can even start your seed now to be ready for our May 15 frost-free date. If you think about these considerable health benefits of your common garden fare, you’ll look at your fruits and vegetables in a new way.

Do you have a question for the Transylvania Extension Master Gardeners or a subject you’d like to see addressed in this column? E-mail us at manymoons@citcom.net or your garden questions answered at our telephone clinic from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesdays, March through October. Call 884-3239 or walk-in during those hours at the Community Services Building, 98 E. Morgan St. The Transylvania Extension Master Gardener program is sponsored by the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service: www.transylvania.ces.ncsu.edu.

Garden Box for early March:
- Plant greens, onions, carrots, beets, radishes, peas, broccoli, cabbage and asparagus crowns.
- Spray fruit trees with dormant oil before color shows in buds.
- Watch out for fire blight in apple and pear trees.
- Work fertilizer and lime into garden soil according to soil test recommendations.