Thinking about starting a vegetable garden? That’s the right place to start – thinking about all the things that need to come together to make your garden as productive as it can be. Here are some things you can do now to ensure a successful gardening experience.

**Prepare yourself.** Learn all you can before you start.

- Talk to other gardeners in your area or in your community garden. They already know about local factors that affect gardening where you are; things like first and last frost dates, local soil types and weather patterns. They’ll have experience with pests and diseases you’re likely to encounter and will be happy to share their “tricks of the trade” with a newcomer.
- Talk to your family about what they like to cook and eat so you’ll have a good idea of which fruits and vegetables you will use and how much you want to grow.
- Gather all the information you can about the plants you want to grow - their soil and fertilizer needs, spacing and general care. Spend time studying seed catalogs and seed packets. They’re filled with helpful information on germination time, light & water requirements, length of time until harvest, and disease resistance.
- Be sure to get answers to all your questions. Become acquainted with your county Cooperative Extension Service. They offer lots of information and services from soil testing and pest identification to recommendations on the best plant varieties.

Now take some time to consider all the information you’ve gathered and choose the plants you want to grow. Be realistic about how much space and time you have - it’s best to start small. Now you’re ready to plan your garden. **Prepare your site.**

- Sketch your plot on paper using the spacing recommendations you’ve learned and noting the path of the sun. Place taller plants so they won’t shade the shorter ones. If possible, plan for crop rotation so that plants from the same family aren’t grown in the same spot two years in a row.
- Your soil is the single most important factor in the success of your garden. It needs to be well-drained, fertile, and have a balanced pH. The best way to achieve this is by adding organic matter. And then adding some more at every possible opportunity. Well-rotted leaves, compost, and manure work best. Material that’s not decomposed can upset the nutrient balance that you’re trying to achieve.
Timing is critical to successful gardening. Some seeds, like peas and lettuce, will happily sprout in chilly early spring soil and be ready to pick by the time the soil is warm enough to plant tomatoes. Knowing which plants require a long growing season and must be started indoors from seed or purchased as seedlings versus those which can be sown directly into the garden is key to a plentiful harvest.

Your first crop is ready to be planted and it’s going to need plenty of attention. Now you’re ready to get your hands dirty.

**Prepare your schedule.** Set aside time to **tend** your garden.

- Consistent watering is especially important early in the season to allow seeds and seedlings to establish strong roots. Throughout the growing season, water only when necessary. Try to water in the morning and avoid using a sprinkler. Instead, direct water to the plant’s roots. Wetting the entire plant can wash away pollen and promote fungal diseases.

- Get familiar with the appearance of your crops so you can spot weeds early - young weeds are much easier to get rid of. If you use a hoe, be careful not to damage the roots of your plantings. The best way to keep your garden weed-free is to apply a 3 - 4" layer of organic mulch. Mulch will suppress weeds, retain soil moisture and add useful organic matter to your soil as well as practically eliminate the need for weeding throughout the season.

- Fertile soil shouldn’t need much feeding during the season but a light application of a well-balanced organic fertilizer particularly for heavy feeders like tomatoes will give them a good boost. You can also apply a side dressing just as the plants start to blossom to insure a bountiful yield.

- Watch your plants closely and be aware of changes such as leaf damage or discoloration and be sure to accurately identify the problem before you treat it. Take preventative measures like using resistant varieties, keeping weeds and waste materials cleaned up, and ensuring good air circulation through the garden.

You’ll soon develop a habit of observation, and you’ll be eager to visit your garden just to see what’s new each day. And before long, you’ll begin to notice that along the way you’ve actually grown some vegetables! Next thing you know, it’ll be time to start preparing for next season!