



Planning Your Vegetable Garden

Dreaming about next year's garden has helped many gardeners survive the gray winter months. These five keys to a successful garden will help you to turn these dreams into a concrete plan for a successful vegetable harvest.

Planning Ahead: Thoughtful planning will increase your garden's productivity, but it means starting to think about next year's garden while you are still harvesting your late season crops. Don't worry if it is already spring and you are just getting started – simply keep this timeline in mind for future seasons.

- **October / November:** *Soil Enrichment* - Test the pH of your soil and adjust if necessary. Add organic matter and plant cover crops as you remove your late season crops.
- **January / February:** *Planning* – Select varieties, plan your garden layout, and purchase seeds.
- **January – April:** *Starting Seeds* – Many plants need more time to mature than our short Northeast growing season permits. By starting your own seeds indoors, you can grow vegetable varieties that aren't readily available as seedlings.
- **April – June:** *Soil Enrichment, Tilling, & Planting*

Soil Preparation: Soil preparation should ideally begin in the fall. pH refers to the acidity or alkalinity of your soil and its value can greatly affect the health of your plants. Adjusting the pH of a garden plot can take several months, so many gardeners test in the fall and give their additions of lime, sulfur, or leaves time to work between growing seasons. The fall is also a great time to plant cover crops to loosen compacted soils and add compost to restore nutrients.

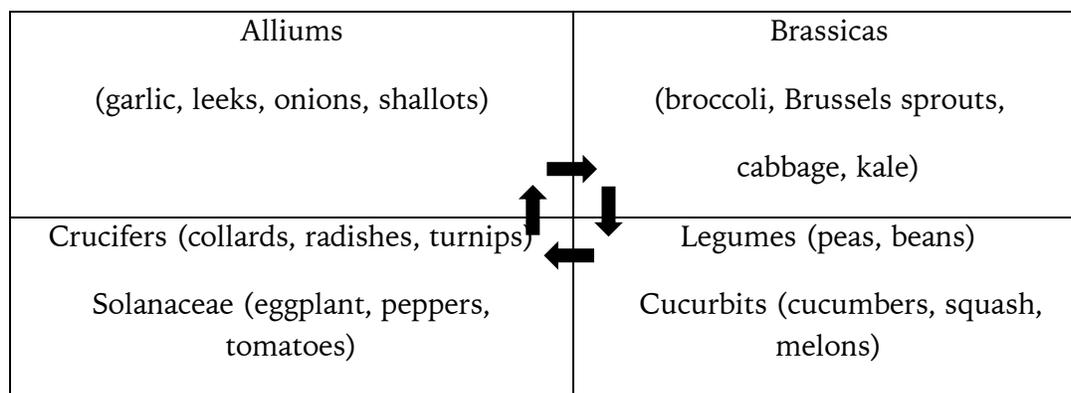
In the spring, you may want to add a fresh layer of compost or well-aged manure prior to planting. You should not turn your garden soil until the soil is dry enough to crumble when pressed in your fist. Soil that is tilled or turned when it is too wet can form large clumps that will harden and remain for the entire season. Regular rototilling can disrupt the beneficial aspects of natural soil structure. Hand digging your beds or adding

Selecting Varieties: It is important to choose plant varieties that will thrive in your area. Speak to other gardeners and the Garden Organizers about varieties that are appropriate for this climate and the space you have available. You might also want to start keeping a garden journal so you will be able to remember what has worked well for you from season to season. If you are just getting started, look for high yield and “tried and true” varieties of common vegetables, and add more unusual varieties as you gain experience. Pay attention to the length of the growing season and cold hardiness (we are in Zone 5) when reading seed catalogues or the back of seed packets.

Location and Layout: When selecting the location of your garden, look for a plot that receives the maximum amount of sunlight possible and is on flat or gently sloping land. Most vegetables require at least 6-8 hours of light a day for good growth. A slight incline will promote good drainage, and hills sloping toward the south will receive extra light. Avoid plots near large trees and wooded areas. Overhanging tree branches will shade your plants, tree roots will compete for nutrients, and the resident wildlife will enjoy your vegetables as much as you do!

After you have selected your garden plot, consider its dimensions when planning for the most efficient use of space. It is a good idea (and usually a lot of fun!) to draw a diagram of your garden plot prior to planting so you can double-check that you have considered the following factors:

- *Spacing:* While it can be tempting to cram as many vegetables as possible into the space you have available, overcrowding your plants will ultimately result in lower yields. To avoid unhealthy competition for sunlight, water, and nutrients, follow planting guidelines on spacing. Keep in mind, however, that you may be able to save on space through trellising and smart companion planting.
- *Companion Planting:* Some plants will actually benefit one another by growing in close proximity, while others can inhibit one another's growth. Beans, for example, don't do well near onions or garlic.
- *Crop Rotation:* Rotating the plants that are grown in each section of your garden from year to year will help break up pest cycles and balance the nutrients in the soil. Some gardeners try to keep plants from the same family together and rotate their blocks of plant families each season.



Timing: ...is everything. Frost will kill or damage some crops, so keep average first and last frost dates in mind when planning your plantings (May 20th and Sept. 20th for the Capital Region). You will need to decide not only when to plant, but whether the seeds will do better when started indoors or planted directly into the soil. See our planting schedule for more specific guidelines.

Remember that good planning is only the first step toward having a successful garden! Regular maintenance throughout the season is just as important for a bountiful harvest. Saving your plans from year to year, however, will help you to learn from each season's unique experiences.