



TIPS FOR BEGINNING VEGETABLE GARDENERS

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 to ensure a successful gardening experience.

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

- * Talk to other gardeners in your area. 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 information about the plants you want to grow – plant from seed or started seedlings, spacing and general care. Study 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 realistic about how much space and time you have - it’s best to start small.**

II. 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 shorter ones. Most vegetable crops need a **minimum of 6-8 hours** of sunlight to provide a good harvest.
- * 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. Be sure to get your soil (including pH) tested if you’re using a garden space for the first time. If your soil fertility is low and your pH is high, you will have poor production and your plants will be more susceptible to pests and disease.
- * The best way to improve soil fertility is by adding organic matter. And then adding some more at every possible opportunity. Well-rotted leaves, compost, and decomposed manure work best. Material that’s not decomposed can upset the nutrient balance that you’re trying to achieve.
- * Consider your garden’s dimensions when planning for the most efficient use of space.
 - o *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 that you may be able to save on space through trellising. (see Maximizing Your Garden Space for more info).
 - o *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.

Alliums (garlic, leeks, onions, shallots)	Brassicas (broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale)
Crucifers (collards, radishes, turnips) Solanaceae (eggplant, peppers, tomatoes)	Legumes (peas, beans) Cucurbits (cucumbers, squash, melons)

III. Timing

...is everything. Frost will kill or damage some crops, so keep average first and last frost dates in mind when planning your garden (May 15th and Sept 30th for the Capital Region). You will need to decide when to plant and what crops need to be started from seed indoors or sowed directly into the soil. Some warm weather crops like cucumbers and beans can be directly sowed once the soil has warmed to 50+ degrees; others like tomatoes and peppers have a longer growing season and the seeds must be started indoors or purchased as started seedlings. See our planting schedule for more specific guidelines.

* **Plants to Consider for the Garden**

- The vegetables suggested below are common productive plants, but you'll also want to determine what plants grow best in your local area. Think about what you love to eat and what's difficult to find in a grocery store or farmers market.

Tomatoes	Zucchini/Summer Squash	Peppers
Beans/Peas	Lettuce and Greens	Beets
Carrots	Leeks/Onions/Garlic	Cabbage
Radishes	Cucumbers/Winter Squash	Broccoli
Culinary Herbs (basil, thyme, sage, rosemary, cilantro, chives, etc)		

- * **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. It's best to water in the morning to allow the plants to take up water during the hottest part of the day. Avoid using a sprinkler, and 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 intruders 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 shredded bark mulch on top of a barrier of newspaper. Mulch will suppress weeds, retain soil moisture and add useful organic matter to your soil, cutting your garden maintenance time dramatically.
- * Apply a well balanced organic fertilizer when planting heavy feeders like tomatoes, corn, cabbage, and broccoli. You can add a small handful of organic fertilizer directly to the planting hole to give it a good start.
- * 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 preventive measures like using resistant varieties, keeping your garden well weeded and clutter free, and ensuring good air circulation throughout the garden.

Soon you'll develop a habit of observation, and you'll be eager to visit your garden just to see what's new each day. Before long, you'll start 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.

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