

HOW TO



BUILD A VEGI GARDEN



INTRODUCTION

Growing vegetables can be fun. It's a great way to spend time with children or have a place to get away and spend time outdoors in the sun.

Planting a garden with vegetables also gives you the pleasure of savouring a delicious, sun-warmed tomato fresh from your backyard. In almost every case, the flavour and texture of varieties you can grow far exceed supermarket produce.

Learning what to plant in a garden with vegetables, and how to tend them for the best harvest, is probably easier than you think. If you plan it right, you can enjoy a beautiful garden full of the fruits of your labour, without having to spend hours and hours tending it.

Planting a garden that includes vegetables and flowers means you've combined natural companions, and that can turn a potential eyesore into an attractive landscape feature.

START SMALL

At first, when deciding what to plant in a garden with vegetables, it's best to start small.

One of the common errors for beginners is planting too much too soon and way more than anybody could eat or want.



STEP 1 HOW MUCH SPACE DO YOU NEED

Keep in mind that when figuring out what to plant in a garden with vegetables, you don't need a large space to begin. If you choose to grow in containers, you don't even need a yard -- a deck or balcony may provide plenty of space.

A good-size beginner vegetable garden is about 16x10 feet and features crops that are easy to grow. A plot this size, based on the vegetable suggested below, can feed a family of four for one summer, with a little extra for canning and freezing (or giving away).

STEP 2 PICKING THE PERFECT SPOT

No matter the size of your vegetable garden, there are 3 basic requirements for success

Full sun. Most vegetables need at least 6-8 hours of direct sun. If they don't get enough light, they won't bear as much and they'll be more susceptible to attack from insects or diseases.

Plenty of water. Because most vegetables aren't very drought tolerant, you'll need to give them a drink during dry spells. When thinking about how to plan a vegetable garden, remember: The closer your garden is to a source of water, the easier it will be for you.

Good soil. As with any kind of garden, success usually starts with the soil. Most vegetables do best in moist, well-drained soil that's rich in organic matter (such as compost or peat moss).

STEP 3 PLANNING YOUR GARDEN

Row Cropping: This is probably what comes to mind when you think of what to plant in a garden with vegetables: You place plants single file in rows, with a walking path between each row.

Row cropping works best for large vegetable gardens, and it makes it easier to use mechanical equipment such as tillers to battle weeds.

The downside of row cropping is that you don't get as many vegetables in a small space, as much of the soil is used for footpaths rather than vegetable plants.

Here's a hint: Allow at least 45cm between your rows so you have plenty of room to work between them. And as you sketch out your plan, place taller vegetables at the north side of the garden. This includes naturally tall plants - like tomatoes and plants that can be grown on vertical supports, including snap peas, cucumbers, and pole beans.

Intensive Cropping: This type of vegetable planting means using wide bands, generally 1-4 feet across and as long as you like. Intensive cropping reduces the amount of area needed for paths, but the closer spacing of the plants usually means you have to weed by hand.

Because of the handwork required, when thinking how to plan a vegetable garden with rows remember: It is important not to make the bands wider than you can comfortably reach.

Intensive cropping also allows you to design your vegetable garden, making it a good choice, for example, if you want to grow vegetables in your front yard. It's a great solution for mixing vegetables with ornamentals, as well.

A specialized version of intensive cropping is the "square-foot method." This system divides the garden into small beds (typically 4x4 feet), that are further subdivided into 1-foot squares. Each 1-foot square is planted with one, four, nine, or 16 plants, depending on the size of the plant when it matures. It also makes sense to leave some areas of the garden unplanted at first. This allows you to plant a second crop to harvest later in the season. Lettuce, radishes, green onions, carrots, and green beans are commonly planted several times during the season.

STEP 4 TESTING & FIXING YOUR SOIL

It's best to test the soil before you begin planting a garden with vegetables. Check drainage by soaking the soil with a hose, waiting a day, then digging up a handful of soil. Squeeze the soil hard. If water streams out, you'll probably want to add compost or organic matter to improve the drainage.

Next, open your hand.

If the soil hasn't formed a ball, or if the ball falls apart at the slightest touch, the soil is probably too sandy. (Add organic matter to improve sandy soil.) If the ball holds together even if you poke it fairly hard, you have too much clay in your soil. (Organic matter improves clay soil, too.)

But if the ball breaks into crumbs when you poke it - like a chocolate cake - rejoice! Your soil is ideal. If your soil doesn't drain well, your best bet will probably be to install raised beds.

Here's a hint: Build raised beds on existing lawn by lining the bottom of frames with several layers of newspaper, then filling with soil. That way, you don't have to dig!

STEP 5 DIGGING YOUR BEDS

Loosen your soil before you plant a garden with vegetables. You can either use a tiller or dig by hand.

Once the soil has been loosened, spread out soil amendments (such as compost) and work them into the soil. Avoid stepping on freshly tilled soil as much as possible. Otherwise, you'll be compacting the soil and undoing all your hard work.

When you're done digging, smooth the surface with a rake, then water thoroughly. Allow the bed to rest for several days before you plant.

STEP 6 CARE AND FEEDING

Most vegetables like a steady supply of moisture, but not so much that they are standing in water. About an inch of water per week is usually sufficient, provided by you if Mother Nature fails to come through. Water when the top inch of soil is dry. For in-ground crops, that may mean watering once or twice a week; raised beds drain faster and may require watering every other day.

Weeds compete with your vegetables for water and nutrients, so it's important to keep them to a minimum. Use a hoe or hand fork to lightly stir (cultivate) the top inch of soil regularly to discourage weed seedlings. A mulch of clean straw, compost, or plastic can keep weeds at bay around larger plants like tomatoes.

Fertilizing your crops is critical to maximizing yields. Organic gardeners often find that digging in high quality compost at planting time is all their vegetables need. Most gardeners, however, should consider applying a packaged vegetable fertilizer, following the directions on the box or bag. Don't apply more than recommended as this can actually decrease yield.

By using vining crops like pole beans and snap peas when planting a garden with vegetables, you can make use of vertical space in the garden and boost yield per square foot.



HARVESTING

This is what it's all about, so don't be shy about picking your produce! Many vegetables can be harvested at several stages. Leaf lettuce, for example, can be picked as young as you like; snip some leaves and it will continue to grow

and produce. Zucchini and cucumber can be harvested when the fruit is just a few inches long, or it can be allowed to grow to full size. The general rule: If it looks good enough to eat, it probably is. Give it a try. With many vegetables, the more you pick, the more the plant will produce.

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