



GROWING VEGETABLES

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Very few things taste better than vegetables you have grown yourself! There are, however, a few decisions you need to make before you rush out and start digging.

First, decide what you want to grow. If you are away often in the summer, it might be a good idea to concentrate on spring and fall vegetables. Be realistic about how many different kinds of vegetables you can give care to. Many people have down-sized to container vegetable gardens but these often need more frequent watering than standard vegetable gardens.

Second, draw the vegetable garden to scale on graph paper and mark/label the rows. You should plant your rows north to south in order to take advantage of even sunlight across the garden. Remember to leave room between rows for weeding and easy access to the vegetables when harvesting. Adding a pathway around the circumference of the garden will be a big help as the season wears on and you start picking ... and weeding! April plantings can include peas, arugula, lettuces, radishes, broccoli, spinach and onions and, in late May or early June, could be followed by tomatoes, squash, eggplant and peppers. A 16' x 20' plot is generally considered a good size for a family of 3-4 but that depends entirely on the number of vegetables you choose to grow. 18" x 24" of spacing between plants is usually adequate although arugula and lettuces really need only 4" – 6" when they are grown in rows. Remember, the plants will look small going in but will grow very quickly!

Site the vegetable garden where you will have 6-8 hours of good sun, wind protection and convenient access to water. Try not to site the vegetable garden near large trees or wooded areas as they will compete with the garden for moisture and other nutrients as well as shelter wild-life. The soil needs to be tested for pH and soil fertility levels. Take soil samples (2"-5" deep) from several spots in the proposed garden, mix them, put into a Ziploc bag and send them to the UConn Extension Service for their analysis and recommendations. (Go to www.soiltest.uconn.edu for further instructions.) After the soil has been tested, the garden needs to be well prepared, cleared of rocks and enriched with compost or manure. (Raised beds give a manicured look and can be very decorative but, realistically, your garden may need to be enclosed for protection against wild-life and even family pets.) A smaller garden can make use of vertical plantings, using a trellis, fence or decorative stakes. This will provide supports as well as becoming an attractive feature and acting as a focal point.

Dig the soil to a depth of 12" and add at least 2" of compost, mixing it in well. Spread the soil test recommendations of lime and fertilizer. Now you are ready to plant. Vegetable crop rotation is a good practice to follow and simply means planting your vegetables in a different spot (within the vegetable garden) every year. This cuts down on pests, insects and disease and keeps the soil healthier. Keeping this year's plot plan for the vegetable garden will help you re-site your plants next year.

General maintenance will include a deep watering at least once a week during dry weather periods and vigilant weeding. Adding a thick layer of straw on top of the garden will help to decrease weeds and aid in retaining moisture. Some gardeners have found that spreading a black plastic cover has proven to increase yields. The soil warms up quickly and weeds cannot grow through. Tomatoes, pepper, squash and eggplant can be planted directly through the black plastic (cut a hole for each plant).

Changing summer weather patterns will have a strong influence on how your vegetables grow. Once your harvest starts to come in, pick ripened crops frequently to encourage production and keep an eye out for any signs of disease and insects. Early evening harvesting is least stressful on the plants.

As fall arrives, start your vegetable garden clean-up by removing all spent plant material to the compost heap. (Destroy any insect diseased plant material and don't compost it.) Spread at least 1" of compost over the vegetable garden and till it into the soil. This will help to reduce pest troubles next Spring. You can also add some nutrients to the soil by adding fallen leaves to the mixture. Consider planting a cover crop (winter rye e.g.) to improve soil fertility.

Container Vegetable Gardens:

Growing vegetables in small spaces is increasingly popular ... and large containers are ideal for this effort. Some people grow lettuces in their flower beds, showcasing the leaves. Don't try to plant vegetables that require a lot of space or that have a long growing season. Using compact forms and choosing vegetables that are traditionally "picked young" (cherry tomatoes e.g.) will give you early crops. Pre-grown vegetables are best suited for container growing and could include tomatoes, peppers, lettuce and patio cucumbers (if grown on a trellis.)

Any container with adequate drainage will hold your plants and placing gravel in the bottom of the container will help improve drainage. Check your containers at least once a day to determine if they need watering but never leave plants sitting in water. Add about 25% compost to your potting mix and top-dress with a slow-release fertilizer. Do not reuse the same soil for a second season.

Inspect your container vegetables on a daily basis and check for diseases, weeds or pests. As the summer advances, be sure your plants are getting enough sun and move the containers if necessary. Most of all, enjoy your harvest!