

## Tips for Growing a Vegetable Garden

Growing vegetables in a backyard garden is a budget-friendly option for getting a daily dose of colorful produce. Use these tips to plan a vegetable garden.

### Begin Inside

Get a head start on spring by first planting seeds indoors. When small plants have begun to emerge, with three to four true leaves, they are ready to transplant. Plant them outdoors only after the last frost of the season. Start with the following:

- **Growing containers:** These can be egg cartons, washed-out yogurt containers or store-bought trays with growing cells. Poke a few holes in the bottom of the containers for drainage.
- **Trays:** Use these to catch excess water.
- **Soil:** Buy some sterile seed-starting mix from the local gardening store.
- **Seeds:** Some easy and manageable seed suggestions are lettuce, broccoli, cherry tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, beans (the bush variety) and herbs.
- **Light:** Fluorescent grow lamps are an option for environments with limited natural light; 12 to 16 hours of direct artificial light per day is suggested. For settings with more natural light, place the seedlings by a south- or west-facing window for the maximum amount of daylight.
- **Temperature:** Seedlings thrive in warm environments. Try to keep the temperature in the immediate environment within 70 degrees Fahrenheit to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Place the seedlings near a heat source or on a heating pad, if needed.
- **Planting depth:** Follow the planting directions on the back of each seed packet. Each seed type is planted at a different depth. Typically, the seed should be planted at a depth of one-and-a-half to two times the width of the seed.
- **Watering:** Seedlings like to be moist, but not too wet. Initially, moisten seedlings with a spray bottle on a daily basis. Once the seedlings begin to emerge, water them primarily by filling the tray with a shallow layer of water.
- **Labeling:** Provide name tags for the seeds (e.g., writing on popsicle sticks or tongue depressors) so they can be identified and planted in an appropriate location when they start to grow.

### Location and Care

Where the vegetable is planted outdoors is extremely important to its success. Consider the following factors:

- **Soil:** Vegetables grow best in well-drained and fertile soil. Soil that has poor drainage will cause roots to suffocate because water replaces the oxygen. To improve drainage, incorporate organic matter such as compost.
- **Layout:** A garden plot should be level to avoid issues of erosion during heavy rains. Garden size depends on the type and amount of vegetables, as well as the amount of time available for garden chores. A manageable size is typically 100 square feet (10 feet by 10 feet). The garden should be large enough to be interesting and enjoyable, but not so large that it becomes a burden.
- **Sunlight:** Most vegetables need at least six hours of full sunlight daily. Having some shade helps keep extensive heat from drying out the crop, but avoid planting vegetables in an area that receives too much shade. Cool-season crops, such as lettuce, spinach, radishes and cabbage, can tolerate low-light intensities. However, warm-season crops, such as sweet corn, snap beans, tomatoes and peppers, need full sun.
- **Plant placement:** Arrange plants so that tending to the crops can be done with the least effort. Perennial crops that stay in the same location year after year should be planted where they will not be damaged during soil preparation for the rest of the plants in the spring. Keep tall plants to the north of lower-growing crops to avoid shading. Consider “companion crops” that mix short-season plants with other plants that need more time to grow. For example, plant radishes next to carrots; carrots need time and room to grow. Vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, bush squash and cucumbers may be planted between rows of peas, spinach and other short-season crops. The short-season plants can be removed when they stop producing.
- **Watering:** Adequate soil moisture is important for seed germination, uniform growth and productivity. Vegetable gardens usually need about 1 inch of water (630 gallons per 1,000 square feet) per week during the growing season. It is possible to reduce the amount of water needed by putting mulch on the soil surface.
- **Weeding:** Weeds rob vegetables of nutrition needed to grow successfully. It is important to control weeds while they are small and before they get out of control. Chemical weed killers are easy to use, but they will not control all weeds in a garden and may also harm vegetables. In a small garden, pulling weeds may work, but it is not effective in a large garden. Instead, cultivate with a hoe or tiller. These will cut the weed roots, causing them to dry in the sun.

## What to Plant

With so many vegetable seeds available, it is often difficult to decide what to choose. Plant only the amount needed; one plant can deliver a great number of vegetables. Look through several seed company catalogs, and compare plants and prices.

Use fresh and packaged seeds for the current year. Home-saved seeds may give disappointing results and cause plant diseases.

Consider the following when picking out seeds and plants:

- Size
- Color
- Disease resistance
- Maturity date
- Yield.

First-time gardeners may prefer to select easy-to-grow vegetables.

## Harvesting

This can be the best part of having a garden, as you literally see the fruits of your labor. However, it is important to pick at the right time and not damage existing plants. Additional tips:

- It is possible to harvest most vegetables several times if only the vegetables that have completely matured are picked.
- Pick vegetables when the foliage is dry; walking through wet foliage spreads diseases.
- Be careful not to step on vines or broken stems. This creates wounds and entrances for diseases.
- Do not pick vegetables off of plants that are wilted. Harvesting at this time can lead to water loss for the plant.
- Put freshly harvested vegetables into the shade, keep them cool, and then use them as soon as possible.
- Use freshly harvested vegetables as soon after harvest as possible.

## Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- National Gardening Association: [www.garden.org](http://www.garden.org)
- American Community Gardening Association (ACGA): [www.communitygarden.org](http://www.communitygarden.org)

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