



Starting a vegetable garden is an easy way to save money — that \$2 tomato plant can easily provide you with 10 pounds of fruit over the course of a season.

Planting a garden with vegetables also give you the pleasure of savoring a delicious, sun-warmed tomato fresh from the garden. In almost every case, the flavor and texture of varieties you can grow far exceed grocery store 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 labor — without having to spend hours and hours tending it.

Deciding What to Plant in a Garden with Vegetables

When deciding what to plant in a garden with vegetables, it's best to start small. You don't want to start off planting more than you can manage and end up wasting food and feeling overwhelmed.

First, take a look at how much your family will eat. Keep in mind that vegetable such as tomatoes, peppers, and squash keep providing throughout the season — so you may not need many plants to serve your needs. Other vegetables, such as carrots, radishes, and corn, produce only once, so you may need to plant more of these.

Determining How Much Space You Need

Once you know what you want to plant, you can figure out the right amount of space for your garden. You don't need a large space to begin — you don't even need a yard if you choose to grow in containers, a deck or balcony may provide plenty of space.

Picking the Perfect Spot

No matter how big your vegetable garden, or how you determine what to plant, there are three basic requirements for success.

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

2. 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.

3. 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).

How to Design and Plan Your Vegetable Garden

There are two basic approaches to planning the layout of a vegetable garden.

Row Cropping

Usually what comes to mind when you think of what to plant in a vegetable garden: you place plants single file in rows, with a walking path between each row.

This approach 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.

Intensive Cropping

This type of planting a garden with vegetables means planting in 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, remember: it is important not to make the bands wider than you can comfortably reach.

This approach also allows you to design your vegetable garden, making it a good choice if you want to grow vegetables in your front yard, or any place you'd like to spruce up. It's a great solution for mixing vegetables with ornamentals as well.

Testing and 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. To counter this, add organic matter to improve the sandy soil. If the ball holds together, even if you poke it fairly hard, you have too much clay in your soil. Which will also improve with organic matter. 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.

Digging Your Beds

Loosen your soil before you plant your vegetable garden. This can be done either by tilling or digging 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 your plant.

Choosing Varieties

Once you start deciding on what to plant in your vegetable garden, you'll probably notice there are endless possibilities. There are thousands of tomato varieties alone!

When selecting varieties, pay close attention to the description on the tag or in the catalog. Each variety will be a little different — some produce smaller plants that are ideal for small gardens or containers, others offer great disease resistance, improved yields, better heat- or cold-tolerance, or other features.

Once you narrow your choices of types of vegetables, pick two or three varieties that seem promising. That way if one variety doesn't perform well, you'll have other plants to make up for it. Next year, grow the best performer again, and choose another to try.

Many vegetables can be started early indoors or purchased already started from a garden center. The benefit of this approach is that you can have a crop ready to harvest several weeks earlier than if you were to plant seeds in the ground. Starting vegetables indoors is not difficult, but it does require some time and attention. Seed packages list the options you have for planting particular seeds.

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 water once or twice a week; raised beds drain faster and many 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 vegetable garden, you can make use of vertical space in the garden and boost yield per square foot.

Harvesting

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. Summer squash (zucchini) and cucumbers 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.

Stopping Pests and Diseases

Pests and diseases are ongoing problems for most vegetable gardeners. Although specific problems may require special solutions, there are some general principles you can follow.

Spring Insects. Row covers, which are lightweight sheets of translucent plastic, protect young crops against many common insects. Row covers are also helpful to prevent damage from light frosts.

Fungal Diseases. Reduce fungal diseases by watering the soil, not the leaves of plants. If you use a sprinkler, do it early in the day so the leaves will dry by nightfall.

If a plant falls prey to a disease, remove it promptly and throw it in the trash. Don't add sick plants to your compost pile. Grow varieties that are listed as disease resistant.

Make it a habit to change the location of your plants each year. If you grew tomatoes in the northwest corner of your garden this year, put them in the northeast corner next year. This reduces the chances that pests will gain a permanent foothold in your garden.

Summer insects. Pick larger insects and caterpillars by hand. Once you get over the "yuck!" factor, this is a safe and effective way to deal with limited infestations.

Use insecticidal soap sprays to control harmful bugs as well.