

Planting a Vegetable Garden



There are several reasons for people wanting to grow their own vegetables. A great deal of satisfaction comes from producing your own fresh garden vegetables. The freshest, tastiest and most nutritious produce comes to your table direct from your garden. Also a person has control over any chemical usage on the crop, if they prefer to garden the organic method.

Site and Soil

Choose a site that gets at least eight hours of full sunlight. Avoid steep slopes that will erode or low, soggy ground. The most important part of successful gardening is to properly prepare the soil. Heavy clay soils are fairly rich in nutrients but very poor in aeration and drainage. An ideal garden soil will contain at least 20% organic matter to improve aeration and drainage as well as to hold nutrients until plants can use them. Peat moss, pastuerized manure, leaves or compost can all be added. Avoid fresh manure because of weed, disease and chemical problems. To prepare the soil, first wait until the soil is ready to work. If the soil is too wet, clay will pack into hard clods. To check the soil, squeeze a handful into a ball, then press on it. If it crumbles, the soil is ready. If the soil dents like modeling clay, it is too wet to till. If the soil is too dry, it will shatter into dust, then turn to mud when it is watered. Water dry soil and let it soak in for a day or two. Then spread the required soil amendments over the soil. Two or three inches of compost or peat moss is fine. Also, spread ten pounds of a 10-10-10. Raised beds provide better drainage and aeration. They also reduce bending and stretching. The beds should be narrow enough so the center can be reached from the walkways. A four feet wide bed with a one-foot wide walkway works well. The soil can be mounded with a lower walkway in between. A better method is to surround the soil with 2X12's. Make sure the wood preservative used is non-toxic. Do not use railroad ties.

Seed

Be sure to use fresh seed from a reputable company. Some seed will still germinate from what was leftover from last year, but larger and oilier seeds such as corn, squash, and bean seed has limited longevity. Tomato and pepper seed usually will last two years if stored properly. Some seeds have very particular requirements to grow, so read and follow the directions carefully.. Many seeds require that the soil be above a certain temperature. Seeds that require warm soil and a long growing season, such as tomatoes, peppers and squash, are usually started indoors and transplanted outdoors when the soil is

warm. Use a special seed starting mix and peat pots and start the seeds about 6 weeks before they are to be planted outdoors.

Planting

Vegetables are often grown in rows. This makes it easier to hoe weeds. However, a small area can be used much more efficiently if plants are planted in groups. When the plants are large enough to cover the ground, weeds will be crowded out. Small seeds can be spread on the surface of the soil and covered with soil. Larger seeds can be spaced out and pushed to the right depth with a finger. Fast maturing plants, such as radishes, can be planted in between slower crops. Early vegetables, such as peas, can be followed by later vegetables. Some vegetables can be planted in late summer for a fall crop: beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, garlic, kale, lettuce, onions, peas and spinach.

Thinning

Seed packages recommend that extra seeds be planted since not all will come up. Also, beet seeds come in clusters. After the seeds sprout, the weaker seedlings should be pinched off to give the rest enough room to grow. Some crops, such as onions and beets, can be partially harvested early to give the remaining ones more room.

Watering

Vegetables need a constant supply of water. Water stress causes hard cored carrots and bitter lettuce. Studies have shown that production is almost doubled if plants have an even supply of water. The best time to water is in the morning so plant leaves dry off quickly. Never water late in the evening so leaves are wet overnight. A few plants, such as tomatoes, will get burned if water drops stand on the leaves in hot sun. However, cool season plants will benefit from a cooling spray on hot days. The most efficient watering system is drip irrigation. It puts the water directly in the soil where it is needed and keeps the tops dry so there are less disease problems. There are also water timers available to take care of watering automatically.

Insect Control

Many insects attack vegetables. What to control insects is a matter of choice for the gardener. Some gardeners prefer the organic method of controlling insects and diseases. Whatever method, read and follow the directions carefully. Observe that the products shouldn't be used within so many days of harvest. There are also organic insect controls such as neem oil, insecticidal soap, pyrethrin and B.T., which can be used up to the day of harvest. Another insect control is to cover the garden with a lightweight garden fabric. It also protects against wind and frost.

Disease Control

Common diseases are powdery mildew and leaf spot diseases. There are also different diseases that affect specific vegetables. Disease controls need to be applied before diseases appear. The best disease control for most diseases is to keep the leaves dry.

Weed Control

Weeds can be controlled by a layer of mulch, by weed barrier, or by a recommended herbicide. There will still be some hand weeding and hoeing to do. There are several styles of hoes that cut the weeds off below the soil line and don't disturb the weed killer on the surface.

Harvest

To get the biggest harvest and best flavor, vegetables should be picked at their peak of maturity. Vegetables that are leaves or stems, such as cabbages and onions, can usually be harvested over a long period as they are needed. Vegetables that are the fruit of the plant, such as peas, beans and tomatoes, should be picked every two or three days to get them when they are first ripe. Melons and squash are ripe when the underside is yellow. Overripe vegetables should be removed so growth goes into the developing vegetables.