



Preparing a Garden Plan

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A little time spent planning your vegetable garden will help things run smoothly from planting day through harvest. If you are starting a new garden, locate it in a spot with good soil and at least eight hours of uninterrupted sunshine during the summer. Choose a site where water is readily available, for vegetables need abundant moisture.

Scan the nearby vegetation before you dig a garden plot. Large black walnut and butternut trees growing by the garden spell trouble, due to the juglone exuded from their roots. Tomatoes and related crops wither away when grown near these trees. Any nearby trees will compete with the garden for water, nutrients, and light.

You might consider switching from a conventional garden laid out in rows to raised beds which will avoid much work and back strain. Beds three or four feet wide allow you to work the soil and care for plants without ever standing on it. They can be any length, depending on the area available, but a cross path every 20 feet or so will prevent the need to walk a great distance to get to the other side of the bed. Adding compost, manure, and topsoil to the bed raises its level, and many beds are framed with well aged railroad ties or landscape timbers.

The deep, rich soil in raised beds permits intensive planting. Arrange your crops in blocks instead of rows and use an equidistant spacing pattern to create a nearly solid leaf canopy or "living mulch". Less room is wasted on walkways in raised bed gardens.

Save space with the use of fences or trellises for cucumbers, tomatoes, and pole beans. Interplant slow and fast growers in the same row to save space (i.e. radishes with carrots, lettuce with tomatoes).

Planning a garden requires more than figuring out where you are going to plant something; you also need to figure out when you will plant it. Take advantage of all of the time available to you for gardening. Plant cool season crops such as spinach, lettuce, and cole crops both spring and fall. Plan to precede a warm weather crop such as tomatoes with a quick growing cool season crop such as lettuce. Cool season crops such as peas can be followed by quick growing warm season crops like bush beans. Sometimes careful planning can get 3 crops out of one plot of ground in a single growing season.

In order to take advantage of your careful planning, be sure to have all of your supplies on hand. Order seeds early, and have transplants started early enough to be ready when you need them in the garden.

In considering what to plant, choose vegetables that you and your family truly enjoy; why waste your time and effort on growing things that won't be eaten? Also, look for vegetables that will give the best return on your time and land investment. Some top performers in this area are tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, and summer squash.

It's fun to try something new each year. Plant sweet onions, or the latest rage in gourmet restaurants, miniature vegetables. How about the colorful red and the green chicory varieties called raddichio?

There are numerous varieties of each crop to consider. Choose varieties resistant to disease, pests and drought whenever possible. Some of the better performers under local conditions are listed on Extension publication 426-480 - Vegetables Recommended for Virginia. Ask your local Extension office for more information.

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