



Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

Beginner's Guide to Starting a Garden

by Jeanmarie Stephenson, UC Master Gardener

Starting a garden may seem like a daunting prospect to the novice gardener, whether it is a kitchen garden for herbs or a patch of flowers and shrubs to enjoy outside your back door. But don't let your lack of experience or knowledge keep you from discovering the joys of gardening.

The satisfaction from growing veggies or flowers in your own garden is enormous. Being outside and active in the fresh air can enliven your spirits. Some people design their garden plots to require a bare minimum of effort, while others arrange their garden to give them as much exercise as they would receive at a fitness gym.



Newly dug garden plot

Concentrate on making your first garden as easy to care for as possible. Decide whether you want a square, rectangle or a free-form plot. Start small so you will be less likely to be overwhelmed. The most common reason people abandon a garden is being overly ambitious and creating too big a garden. Make your garden smaller than you think you can handle, so you don't have trouble keeping up with the weeding, mulching, watering, plant tending, and picking your veggies or flowers. Add to your garden over time, increasing it just enough so you don't begrudge the time or energy spent on its care. Done in stages, your garden will grow to suit your needs without becoming too much to handle.

Let's look at some key guidelines for starting a new garden.

The first thing to consider is the area in which you want to garden. It should receive 6-8 hours of direct sunlight, and it is better to have afternoon shade rather than morning shade and full afternoon sun. The area will have to be cleared of existing vegetation. One way to do this is by completely covering it with cardboard or newspaper, then topping it with a thick layer of mulch for several weeks to smother grasses and weeds. Eventually it all breaks down and you are left with lovely topsoil, but you have to wait 6 to 8 weeks before you can start planting.



Garden tools

Another way to clear a space for your new garden is to use a tiller or turn the soil with a shovel or spading fork. You will need to turn the soil several times and rake or pull out any pieces of vegetation that may regrow later. Remember, don't dig for too long at one time and take short breaks. A few minutes of work each day will add up and help you avoid sore muscles.

Most new gardens will benefit from a liberal application of compost or manure spread in a 1/2 -to-1 inch layer over the new beds. Work the organic matter into the soil to a depth of about 8 to 10 inches, where most plant

roots grow. Although soils vary in their mineral balance and fertility, most of our soils in the valley and foothills are great for gardening and just require a little organic matter, fertilizer, and sometimes gypsum at the start of each season. A soil test is not usually required, but it is advisable to talk with any neighbors who seem to be successful with their gardens, to learn if they have any special problems.

Organic amendments such as compost, grass clippings, soybean or cottonseed meal, well-rotted manure, or leaf mold nurture earthworms and other beneficial soil organisms, plus provide fertility. Regular applications of organic material will increase your soil life, texture, and help it retain moisture.

Concentrate on making your first garden as easy to care for as possible. If you decide to plant veggies, here are a few suggestions. Planting in dedicated beds, not rows, makes it easier and cheaper to apply fertilizer only in the beds. Another advantage of establishing permanent beds is that you can avoid walking on the planted soil, which compacts it. The close spacing of plants also helps with weed control because the shade prevents weed seeds from germinating. Just be sure to space the seeds or plants far enough apart to allow for growth.

Take time to decide what you want to plant. Carefully read catalogs and seed packets to determine which plants will grow in your area and plant them at the recommended time and spacing. The Master Gardeners offer a local vegetable planting guide on their website found at:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/files/84716.pdf. Appropriate plant selection can make a big difference in both your enjoyment and success as a gardener. Good Luck!

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