Planning Your Vegetable Garden

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LOCATION

When deciding where to plant your vegetable garden, choose the best available location by keeping the following factors in mind. Good soil. You may have little choice concerning the soil type available to you, but you can use a simple test to find out whether your soil is in good condition for planting. Squeeze a handful of soil to test for moisture content. If the squeezed soil forms a clump, the soil is too wet to work. If you work soil that contains this much moisture, it might form into hard, cement-like clumps, which can cause problems for the remainder of the year. If the soil crumbles easily when it is squeezed, it is in an ideal condition to work. Correct tillage and the use of good organic and soil amendments can improve poor soil and can increase yield, even in good soil. Raised beds help improve drainage and tend to warm up sooner in the spring.

Level ground is best for growing vegetables. It is easier to prepare, plant, and irrigate than sloping ground. If you must plant on sloping ground, run rows across the slope, not up and down, to keep the soil from washing away during irrigation. Water supply. Locate your garden near an abundant supply of water easily reached with a garden hose. Adequate light. Vegetables need at least 8 hours of sunlight each day for best growth. Plant vegetables where they are not shaded by trees, shrubs, walls, or fences. Trees and shrubs also compete with vegetables for the water available in the soil. If your garden is large enough for you to use power tools, be sure you have easy access to a road or driveway wide enough for equipment movement.

EFFICIENT USE OF SPACE

A key to any successful garden is planning. Time and space cannot be wasted if the gardener is to produce large amounts of vegetables from a limited area. Gardeners should pay close attention to timing of planting and harvesting, selection of varieties, trellising, and other space-saving practices.

Timing refers to the maximum use of the available growing season. In California, there are 3 to 4 seasons, depending on your location, in which vegetables can be

grown. Yet, many gardeners grow only summer crops. By planting a spring crop, a summer crop, and a fall crop, a gardener can get 3 crops from the same space. This requires close rotation of crops, such as spring lettuce followed by summer green beans followed by fall spinach. The idea involves planting a cool-season crop, following it with a warm-season crop, and then finishing with another cool-season crop. Careful attention to days to maturity for each crop grown will establish the ideal rotation period.

Trellising and staking. Do not grow horizontally what you can grow vertically. Vining crops, such as tomato, squash, cucumber, and pole beans, use a great deal of space when allowed to grow along the ground. Trellises, stakes, cages or other supports minimize the ground space used and increase garden productivity. Support materials can consist of wood, extra stakes, twine, or a nearby fence.

Improved varieties may be the best way for the space-conscious gardener to achieve higher yields. Today, a gardener can select bush varieties of beans, cucumbers, melons and squash that require much less space than standard varieties. Determinant tomatoes (those that grow only to a certain height) can be trained more easily to a stake.
Succession planting consists of sowing seeds of a given crop at 2 to 3-week intervals to produce a continuous supply of vegetables. Beans, corn, lettuce, turnips, and beets are well suited to this practice.

Companion planting is the planting of two crops in the same bed at the same time. Normally one crop matures and is harvested before the other one. Radishes and carrots work well this way, since the radishes can be harvested well before the carrots are very large. The quick-growing radish seedlings also help to mark planted rows.

Intercropping involves planting early-maturing crops between the rows of late-maturing crops to increase production in a small area. For example, beans, radishes, green onions, spinach, or leaf lettuce may be planted between rows of tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, or corn. The quicker-maturing crops will be harvested before the others become very large.

Proper spacing between rows and within rows is extremely important. The use of power equipment will require that the distance between rows exceed the width of the equipment. Maximum production will require that you disregard standard row and plant spacing and utilize wide rows or beds for planting. For instance, seeds of many crops, such as leaf lettuce or beets, can be broadcast in a bed 1 to 3 feet across and thinned to obtain proper spacing. Other crops, such as cabbage or broccoli, can be planted closely in wide rows so that their outer leaves will touch one another when the plants are about three-fourths mature. These methods reduce space wasted as aisles, and often provide such dense shade that weed growth is inhibited and evaporation of soil moisture is reduced.

Raised beds are often helpful in maximizing plant growing space in a garden. They provide the advantages noted above for wide beds, Plus they can be used to optimize soil otherwise poorly suited for vegetables. Raised beds can be achieved by adding large amounts of topsoil or organic soil amendments so that a bed is established above the previous soil level. Raised beds also lend themselves well to the use of plastic mulch, furrow irrigation, and improved drainage, if needed.

WHAT TO PLANT

Plant enough of each vegetable crop to meet your family's needs for fresh, stored, and preserved supplies. When choosing vegetable varieties or hybrids, consider such factors as disease resistance, maturity date, compactness of plant, and the size, shape, and color of the vegetable desired. Keep in- mind past experiences with a given variety and corn, ties with your favorites. Keep track of how each variety performs, planting and harvest dates, yield and seed sources in a garden notebook or on your computer.

PREPARING A GARDEN PLAN

It is best to plan on paper before planting your garden. Develop a to-scale sketch if possible. A well-planned garden can provide fresh or preserved vegetables for use all year. The plan should contain crops and amounts to be planted, dates of planting and estimated harvest, planting location for each crop, specific spacing between rows, and trellising or support required. First, make a sketch of the garden area showing the dimensions of the garden. Prepare a list of vegetables you want to grow. Then arrange the crops in the garden according to the amounts you wish to grow, dates to be planted, and space available. Plant perennial crops, such as rhubarb and asparagus, to one side of the garden so that the plants are not disturbed by preparations for future crops. Plant tall crops, such as corn and pole beans, on the north side of the garden so that they will not shade low-growing crops.

TOOLS

You only need a few, good quality tools for a small home garden.

Spade or spading fork: Use to turn the ground, to turn under organic matter and to break up large clumps of soil.

Rake: Use to smooth out the soil after spading and after preparing the seedbed. You can also use it for clearing up rubbish and removing small weeds.

Hoe: Use to remove tough weeds and to cover seeds after planting. When turned sideways, you can also use a hoe to dig a V-shaped row for planting.

Yardstick, twine, and stakes: Use to get rows evenly spaced and laid out in straight lines.

Trowel: One of the handiest garden gadgets, it is useful for transplanting and for loosening soil around plants.

Following these simple guidelines will keep your tools in good condition:

- Clean tools after each use. A putty knife is good for scraping off dirt. If tools get rusty, soak them in kerosene for a few hours, then use a wire brush or fine sand to scrub off the rust.

- Keep cutting tools sharp.

- Have a special place for storing tools where you can hang them up out of the way to prevent damage to both you and to them. Keep tools in a dry place to prevent rust.