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Ten Beginning Steps for Every Home Garden

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Photos by Yvonne Savio
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1. Research your garden site for best soil, exposure, etc.

You can't just dig a hole, plop a plant in, and expect to get lots of flowers and fruit. You have to determine where the best garden site will be. Even if you have only a tiny area, you have options like containers, shade plants, soil mix, and watering.

2. Soil is ALL important

Soil is the beginning, middle, and end of successful gardening. It doesn't just prop up the plants! Healthy soil makes for healthy plants-and lots of flowers and fruit! "Feed" the soil with lots of compost and manure so plant roots will grow well.

3. Grow only plants proven to do well in your micro-climate

Use only varieties that have excelled where you garden, whether it's along the coast, inland, or in the mountains or desert. If the plant description indicates that plants should have full sun, this means a minimum of six hours of direct sun every day. Along the coast, this is especially important since the moisture in the "marine layer" cools things down. Inland, plants may need some protection from late afternoon sun.



There's the veggie garden...

4. Transplant only the healthiest seedlings

Why waste time and garden space-and your efforts-with sickly plants? Choose the healthiest you can find. Is it the right time of year? Is there sufficient sun or shade? Are you planting at the proper depth and spacing? Ruffle the rootball slightly to loosen up the outer roots, and rough up the sides of the planting hole so roots don't meet a "brick wall." Tomatoes develop "adventitious" roots all along the portion of the stem that is underground, so plant them deeply-up to the top set of leaves-to encourage lots of new roots.

5. Wait until the soil has warmed sufficiently.

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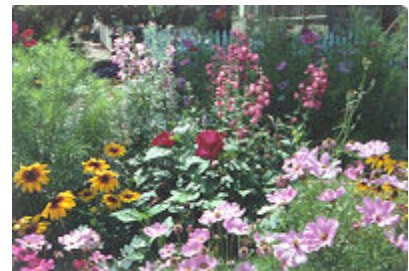
Of course you want to have the first ripe tomato on the block, but don't transplant summer vegetable seedlings into the ground until the soil has warmed to about 63 degrees Fahrenheit. If you can sit comfortably on the soil, it's ok; if not, it's too early. Peppers, especially, will "pout" and never really thrive when transplanted too early.

6. Have plants grow up trellises

Trellises enable the greatest use of the soil since you can plant more closely, and foliage goes up instead of shading more growing space. Tomatoes come in "determinant" (they grow only so high) or "indeterminate" (they keep growing and growing and growing), so give them support before they get too big and flop over.

7. Constantly plan ahead

Anticipate what plants will need next. You'll need to vary watering according to the weather, but always water deeply to "teach" the roots to grow deeply for their water. You'll need to fertilize sometime during the season to boost fruit production, but enrichen the soil before you plant to give transplants a healthy start. When harvest time comes, your plants will be productive, and you'll be a happy gardener.



...and then there are flower gardens.

8. Know what fertilizer to use and when

Before transplanting, incorporate a complete fertilizer (like 15-15-15) into the root area. As plants grow, use a good organic fertilizer, like fish emulsion (yes, it will be stinky for a day or two, but some new products don't smell so strongly). When tomatoes start blooming, give them another feeding to encourage lots of blossoms and fruit.

9. Water properly

It's very easy to overwater young plants without good drainage, but it's almost impossible to overwater a fully-grown tomato plant, which needs several gallons of water every day during really hot weather. Also, plants like to have their leaves (including undersides) rinsed every once in a while during hot weather. Fungi and other diseases can get a good start within only six

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hours, though, so make sure foliage dries off by sunset. Soaker hoses and other "tricklers" help release water slowly so it's absorbed into the soil to keep roots well-supplied.

10. Mulch, mulch, mulch

Keep replenishing a two-to-four-inch thick layer of organic matter on top of the soil to moderate soil temperature, hold in moisture, and prevent weeds from sprouting. The smaller the pieces of mulch are, the more protection they offer. But, lay down only a thin layer of fresh grass clippings, so they don't form an impervious layer.