



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

PREPARING THE SOIL FOR A VEGETABLE GARDEN

By Elaine Applebaum, Placer County Master Gardener

Q How can I prepare an area for my summer vegetable garden?

A The first thing you want to do is remove any weeds, preferably before they go to seed so that you'll have fewer to pull in the future. Also remove any roots or debris left over from last year's crop.

All gardeners dream of having perfect soil. No matter what kind we start off with, clay, sandy or any thing in between, all can be improved by the addition of organic matter. This can be in the form of aged animal manure, peat moss, compost (home-made or store bought), or the residues of a cover crop (green manure) planted by those gardeners savvy enough to have planted one in the fall. About 1 pound of organic matter should be applied for every 4 to 5 square feet of garden area.

Remember not to work in the soil if it is too wet because you will compact it into clods. If you squeeze a handful of soil and it stays together in a ball, it is too wet—wait until you squeeze it and it falls apart into loose crumbles. Using a rototiller, digging fork or spade, mix the organic material into the soil to a depth of at least six inches. This should be done several weeks before planting to allow time for it to decompose. Rake the surface smooth, removing any large rocks. You may want to create raised beds or rows to enhance drainage. Avoid walking on the prepared soil to keep from compacting it.

Most vegetable crops require a steady supply of nutrients for best growth. Before adding fertilizer, it is important to test your soil so you know what, if anything, to add. A simple soil test kit can be purchased at most garden centers. This will tell you the pH of your soil (whether it is acidic or alkaline) and the amount of the three major nutrients, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, needed. Most vegetables do best with a pH between 5.5 and 7.5. If your soil is too alkaline, add sulphur; if it is too acidic, add lime.

Depending on the results of your soil test, add the appropriate organic or chemical fertilizer, being sure to read and follow the package directions carefully. With fertilizer, more is NOT better. Over fertilizing harms the environment, burns your plants and wastes money. Fertilizer can be applied either in a shallow groove 4 to 6 inches on each side of the rows where vegetables will be planted, or scattered over the surface of the bed and lightly raked in. A well-prepared soil bed is the first step toward a successful vegetable garden. Your seedlings and transplants will appreciate the work you've put in and reward you with a bountiful, tasty crop. Enjoy!

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