# Planning Your Vegetable Garden

Spring is upon us, so it is time to start planning your vegetable garden. Vegetable garden planning may feel like an overwhelming job but it can be made easier by following this helpful advice.

## Why Grow Vegetables

Starting a vegetable garden at home is an easy way to save money -- that $2 tomato plant can easily provide you with 10 pounds of fruit over the course of a season. It also gives you the pleasure of savoring a delicious, sun-warmed tomato fresh from the garden. In almost every case, the flavor and texture of varieties you can grow far exceed the best grocery store produce.

Plus, growing vegetables can be fun. It's a great way to spend time with children or have a place to get away and spend time outdoors in the sun.

## Deciding What to Grow

It's best to start small with your first garden. Many gardeners get a little too excited at the beginning of the season and plant more than they need -- and end up wasting food and feeling overwhelmed by their garden. Keep in mind that vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, and squash keep providing throughout the season -- so you may not need very many plants to serve your needs. Other vegetables, such as carrots, radishes, and corn, produce only once so you may need to plant more of these.

## Determining How Much Space You Need

Once you know what you want to plant, you can figure out how much space your garden will need. Keep in mind that you don't need a large space to begin a vegetable garden. If you choose to grow in containers, you don't even need a yard -- a deck or balcony may provide plenty of space.

## Picking the Perfect Spot

No matter how big your vegetable garden is, there are three basic requirements for success:

1. Full sun. Most vegetables need at least 6-8 hours of direct sun. If they don't get enough light, they won't bear as much and they'll be more susceptible to attack from insects or diseases.
2. Plenty of water. Because most vegetables aren't very drought tolerant, you'll need to give them a drink during dry spells. The closer your garden is to a source of water, the easier it will be for you.
3. Good soil. As with any kind of garden, success usually starts with the soil. Most vegetables do best in moist, well-drained soil that's rich in organic matter (such as compost or peat moss).

## Testing Your Soil

It's best to test the soil before you begin digging. Check drainage by soaking the soil with a hose, waiting a day, then digging up a handful of soil. Squeeze the soil hard. If water streams out, you'll probably want to add compost or organic matter to improve the drainage.

Next, open your hand. If the soil hasn't formed a ball, or if the ball falls apart at the slightest touch, the soil is probably too sandy. (Add organic matter to improve sandy soil.)

If the ball holds together even if you poke it fairly hard, you have too much clay in your soil. (Organic matter improves clay soil, too.) But if the ball breaks into crumbs when you poke it, your soil is good to go as is.

## Digging Your Beds

Loosen your soil before you plant. You can either use a tiller or dig by hand. Once the soil has been loosened, spread out soil amendments (such as compost) and work them into the soil. Avoid stepping on freshly tilled soil as much as possible. Otherwise, you'll be compacting the soil and undoing all your hard work. When you're done digging, smooth the surface with a rake, then water thoroughly. Allow the bed to rest for several days before you plant.

## Choosing Varieties

Once you start picking out varieties, you'll probably notice that the possibilities for a vegetable garden are endless. There are thousands of tomato varieties alone! When selecting varieties, pay close attention to the description on the tag or in the catalog. Each variety will be a little different: Some produce smaller plants that are ideal for small gardens or containers, others offer great disease resistance, improved yields, better heat- or cold-tolerance, or other features.

Once you narrow your choices to types of vegetables, pick two or three varieties that seem promising. That way if one variety doesn't perform well, you'll have other plants to make up for it. Next year, grow the best performer again, and choose another to try.

## Care and Feeding

Most vegetables like a steady supply of moisture, but not so much that they are standing in water. About an inch of water per week is usually sufficient, provided by you if Mother Nature fails to come through. Water when the top inch of soil is dry. For in-ground crops, that may mean watering once or twice a week; raised beds drain faster and may require watering every other day.

Weeds compete with your vegetables for water and nutrients, so it's important to keep them to a minimum. Use a hoe or hand fork to lightly stir (cultivate) the top inch of soil regularly to discourage weed seedlings. A mulch of clean

straw, compost, or plastic can keep weeds at bay around larger plants like tomatoes.

Fertilizing your crops is critical to maximizing yields. Organic gardeners often find that digging in high quality compost at planting time is all their vegetables need. Most gardeners, however, should consider applying a packaged vegetable fertilizer, following the directions on the box or bag. Don't apply more than recommended as this can actually decrease yield.

## Harvesting

This is what it's all about, so don't be shy about picking your produce! Many vegetables can be harvested at several stages. Leaf lettuce, for example, can be picked as young as you like; snip some leaves and it will continue to grow and produce. Summer squash (zucchini) and cucumber can be harvested when the fruit is just a few inches long, or it can be allowed to grow to full size. The general rule: If it looks good enough to eat, it probably is. Give it a try. With many vegetables, the more you pick, the more the plant will produce.

Resources: BHG.com, eHow, Squidoo, vegetablegardeningtips.com, mastergardeners.org