

Vegetable Gardening

By Basil Badley and Jason Miller

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Follow these pointers to save money while putting fresh, homegrown vegetables on your table.

By now you've probably heard about the uptick in U.S. homeowners who are choosing to grow their own produce as a hedge against the recession. Their logic is simple: Why spend money on vegetables when you can grow your own for a fraction of the cost? We couldn't agree more.

If you find yourself thinking about joining the ranks of home gardeners, we have a few tips that will help get you started on the right track. All you need to do is follow these simple steps.

First, find a site for your garden. Look for the sunniest place you have. It is best to find a spot that gets at least eight hours of sun per day; 12 hours is ideal. Make sure you have water available and try to avoid planting near trees and shrubs, because they will shade the site and compete with your vegetables for water and nutrients. If your proposed site is one you have used for several years, try not to plant genetically related plants (tomatoes and peppers, for example) in the same place for more than three years in a row. If you're starting a new bed, keep track of what you plant so you can avoid planting genetically related plants in the same place for that three-year period.

Don't think your vegetable garden has to be hidden from view. It is very easy to plant a vegetable garden that not only produces great-tasting vegetables, but looks good as well. For ideas on how to create a productive, good-looking vegetable garden, visit the WSU Discovery Garden at 16602 State Route 536 in west Mount Vernon, next to the WSU Northwestern Washington Research & Extension Center. If you visit the garden on Tuesday mornings, you will likely be able to discuss vegetable gardening with one of the master gardeners as they work to maintain the garden.

Next, decide what to plant. Start by making a list of the vegetables you and your family enjoy. Remember, homegrown vegetables will taste better than what you generally purchase at the supermarkets, because the time from harvest to cooking is so much shorter. As Skagitonians, we are lucky to have many farmers' markets, roadside produce stands, and even some daily deliveries to local markets. Still, there is nothing like growing your own.

In western Washington, your best bet will be shorter-season vegetable varieties. Whether you're starting your veggies from seed or buying seedlings, find out what the "days to maturity" is for that plant. This will help to ensure the plant will deliver what it promises before the days get too cool in the fall.



Quick-to-mature radishes ('French Breakfast' shown) are a failsafe choice for early-season produce, as are salad greens. Photo by Jason Miller.

Next, prepare the bed for planting. It is best to have deep, well-drained soil with compost or other natural amendments added to the soil. A rototiller works great, as does a garden fork. If you till, don't overdo it; over a period of years, hardpan can develop beneath the tilled depth. If your soil is hard with clay, don't till; it might be wise to consider raised beds. If formal sides for raised beds are too costly, just mound the bed to get a raised bed effect. Add fertilizer just before planting; composted manure, soluble fertilizers and compost all work well.

Sow your seeds according to label instructions, and/or plant your vegetable starts. Try to get the plant starts plants in the ground as soon as possible. If you plant seeds, thin them as they mature to give the plants room to grow (very important with carrots, for example). If you plan to grow some plants on a trellis, such as beans, peas or cucumbers, plant them on the north end of your beds so the trellis won't shade your shorter vegetables as it becomes covered with foliage.



Trellises are a great way to save space in small gardens, but if you plan to grow plants on a trellis, locate them on the north end of your beds so they won't shade your shorter vegetables as they become covered with foliage. Photo by Jason Miller.

Baby your beds. Don't let your vegetable garden dry out. Make sure you have good drainage and don't let your plants stand in puddles of water. The best and most efficient irrigation system is a trickle type, such as soaker hoses, which work well and are relatively inexpensive. Drip systems put the water right at the roots and keep the tops of plants dry, which decreases the likelihood that your plants will get diseased. Overhead sprinkling is the most inefficient, but also the least expensive and most commonly used. If you use an overhead sprinkler, try to water your plants early in the day to keep evaporation at a minimum while allowing the foliage to dry before nightfall. If you grow tomatoes, though, *do not water with an overhead sprinkler* because the vines must be kept as dry as possible to help avoid late-season blight.

Finally, keep your garden as free from weeds as you possibly can and enjoy your harvest.



Soaker hoses are an efficient way to deliver water directly to your plants while minimizing evaporation. Concrete Master Gardener Jason Miller likes to lay out his soaker hoses, then plant seeds along them, such as these peas. Photo by Jason Miller.



Tomatoes, such as these ‘Legend’ beauties, should never be watered with an overhead sprinkler. Keep the vines as dry as possible to help avoid late-season blight. Photo by Jason Miller.

Want to learn more about vegetable gardening? Helpful bulletins are available from the Washington State University Extension. Visit the WSU Publications Web site at <http://pubs.wsu.edu/> or pick them up in person at the WSU Skagit County Extension office, located at 11786 Westar Lane, Ste. A, in Burlington. You also may drop in on our weekly clinics for one-on-one advice or curl up with an in-depth publication such as S. Solomon’s “Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades.”

Vegetable-gardening workshop

- **What:** “Grow your own groceries” — a free WSU Know & Grow workshop, will give you tips on how to grow fresh vegetables on a penny pincher’s budget. Focusing on the best vegetables to grow in our locale, the workshop will include additional information to help you grow nutritious food year-round. Presented by WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, in partnership with the WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center.
- **When:** 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 21
- **Where:** WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, 16650 Highway 536, west of Mount Vernon
- **Speaker:** Dr. Carol Miles, WSU Vegetable Horticulturalist
- **Learn more:** To suggest an idea or topic for a future WSU Know & Grow workshop, call 360-428-4270.