

Beginning a Vegetable Garden

By Kathy Wolfe
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Part 1: Planning and prepping

In these uncertain and chaotic times, people are finding friends, family and connecting with the natural world as good ways to ease anxieties and keep calm. Gardening has been shown to reduce stress, fight depression, improve our diets (in the case of produce growing), give us exercise and build relationships with family, neighbors and fellow gardeners. Many readers are now interested in growing their own vegetables for the first time and asking for advice on how to begin. This two-piece series will cover planning, prepping and planting to get you started.

PLANNING

Good planning will lead to optimum success. Site selection is key. Find the sunniest area of your yard. Vegetables should receive between 6 – 8 hours of full sunlight per day to thrive, particularly those that form fruit such as tomatoes, eggplants and peppers. Leafy vegetables can grow with less. Be sure large trees and shrubs are not so close as to shade the area and steal nutrients and water from your vegetables.

If the sun shines brightest in your front yard, plant your garden there (if allowed by local regulations). You can also incorporate some vegetables into your front landscape, combining plants with similar needs. If your yard is small or shady, decks and driveways might be used for growing vegetables in containers, baskets or grow bags. Containers need to be large enough to allow the soil to retain water, make healthy root growth and have good drainage for the size of the mature plant. Varieties bred for smaller spaces are ideal for containers. Look for words like “bush,” “compact,” and “space saver” on the label.

Avoid low, flat areas of your yard that can flood or where water and cold air collects, as your roots will drown. Those areas remain cold in spring and delay plant growth. If this is your only option, use barriers such as a stone wall or stack of hay bales to divert the cold air and possibly hold solar-generated heat. If your yard is sloped, plant well up on the south-facing side for best results. All sloped sites should be planted horizontally in terrace- garden fashion to reduce erosion.

Plan your site near a water source for irrigation. Ideally, your garden will be near your house or another area that you pass frequently so you can spot problems with diseases, insects and other pests. This also provides for ease of harvest.



Tomatoes of any size are a popular home vegetable garden choice. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Do not choose an area where topsoil has been removed, unless you plan on bringing in your own soil to plant in raised beds or containers. Subsoil does not contain organic matter, which improves soil tilth, water-holding capacity and plant nutrients. Always check for proper drainage to avoid root rot.

Choose vegetables that will fit your space and that you and your family enjoy. Consider what tastes best and what is the most expensive to buy. How many people will you be feeding and how much produce are you planning to store in the freezer, by canning or dehydration?

If you are a beginning gardener, start small. You will be glad you did. Order seeds and buy starts that have been grown in climate zones similar to our Pacific Northwest area. Note the number of days to maturity on the seed packet or plant tag. Our vegetable growing season is relatively short so you may be unsuccessful choosing a plant that takes 100 days to harvest. While there are variations around the county, the average frost-free season is around 196 days, generally from April 9 through October 22.

Once your site has been established and vegetable selection determined, take time to map out your plan. Use this information for future crop rotation, succession planting (follow early, cool season crops with a later fall crop), and intercropping (pairing a quick growing crop with a long season crop, e.g. spinach with eggplant or lettuce with tomatoes). Garden planting calendars for Skagit County are available online to help schedule sowing and transplanting dates.

Start a garden journal with photos to record the success of the varieties you have chosen, the location of your plants and any unusual weather or pest conditions you encountered.



Now that you have taken time for the important steps in planning, let's move on from the mental workout to the physical.

(If you have questions or need advice about vegetable gardening, contact us at skagitmgplantclinic@gmail.com for help.)

Left: Carrots do well in containers, raised beds or seeded in the ground in deep, rich soil with good drainage. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

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