

# Beginning a Vegetable Garden

By Kathy Wolfe  
May 8, 2020



## Part 2: Correct planting is a key first step

(Part one in this two-part series can be found under May 1, 2020.)

You now have a plan, direction and purpose. Let's get moving!

Raised beds are the best way to start, achieve and manage a home vegetable garden. They allow the gardener to concentrate soil preparation and fertility in small areas; keep the garden well-drained even in winter; and have drier, warmer soil, allowing for earlier planting in the spring and later fall production. They can be placed on hard surfaces, terraced slopes and atop otherwise unsuitable soil.

To create a raised bed, first remove all grass and weeds from the designated garden area. Place 4" - 6" of compost on the ground so it covers the length and width of your planned bed. A four foot width is best so the center can be reached on either side.

Now remove the topsoil from the surrounding sides and place it on top of the compost. Place another 2" of compost on top of the topsoil. You have now created your unframed raised beds. Where the topsoil has been removed will be your pathways so you can avoid stepping onto and compressing your garden soil. The Discovery Garden vegetable patch uses this system.

Frames can also be used but may be more difficult to move from year to year. Wood is a common construction material in framed beds. If you choose to use treated wood so your beds will last longer, check to be sure that the wood is treated with non-toxic chemicals. Plastic and galvanized metal can also be used. Straw bales are another alternative.

Before planting, a soil test will help you learn if there are nutritional problems, as well as your soil pH (whether acid or alkaline) and your soil type. Proceed adding necessary amendments based on your test results. Contact your extension office to find soil testing facilities and recommendations.

You are now ready to plant. Read your seed packets for directions on spacing, days to harvest and the best months to plant for optimal production. Plant seeds roughly three times as deep as the seed's diameter, unless otherwise directed on the package. Some seeds need light to germinate.



Delicious, nutritious kale does well in Pacific Northwest gardens. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

When choosing transplants, look for plants that fit into their pot. A large plant crammed into a small pot will probably be root bound and will suffer from transplant shock. Avoid any obvious insect damage or yellow leaves. Buy from a reputable source that doesn't spray with harmful chemicals. Try to find regionally grown transplant starts.

Most transplants are planted at the same depth as they were growing in the pot. Tomatoes are an exception because they are planted deeper or trenched in to allow a stronger root system to grow. The transplant label should guide you. If in doubt, find a science-based gardening resource site online to find your answer.

Know the difference between cool-weather and warm-weather crops and plant accordingly. Leafy greens, broccoli, carrots, peas, potatoes and onions are examples of cool weather crops that can go into the garden early in spring and be planted again in July for a fall harvest. Wait to plant the heat lovers such as peppers, cucumbers, eggplant and tomatoes until all danger of frost is passed and the soil is sufficiently warmed.

Young plants are easily damaged and may require some protection from cold, wind or wide variations in temperature. Consider a tunnel covered with a spun bonded, nonwoven polyester cloth to get them off to a good start. Be sure to check their water needs frequently because the roots have not yet set themselves fully into the soil.

Gardening requires a time commitment on a consistent basis for planting, watering, weeding, thinning, pest control and harvesting. If your schedule is already hectic, you might want to start with easy-care herbs or container vegetable plants set close to the house.

The rule of thumb for watering is 1" per week but this can change with your soil make-up, the amount of sun your plant receives, the maturity of the plant, and wind conditions on the property. Before watering, dig down a couple of inches to see if the area around the roots is dried out. Don't overwater, or roots and seeds will rot. But don't let the roots bake in the soil either. Check often.



Perennial vegetables, such as artichokes, rhubarb and asparagus, benefit from an area separate from annuals so they can grow undisturbed year after year. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Remove weeds by hand or a shuffle hoe while they are small. They are competing with your plants' water and nutrient needs and can often harbor slugs that can ruin your crop quickly.

If you find insect pests, use a minimal amount of organic solutions or other good gardening practices to exclude them. Contact your local extension office and master gardeners for answers. Remember, not all insects are harmful. You need help from beneficial insects for pollination and to consume the destructive insects. Remove any slugs you find, even the tiniest ones. Fence against rabbits, deer and pets, if necessary.

Harvest crops when they are in their prime and store them appropriately.

For more in-depth information on many of the subjects mentioned, go to the Skagit County Master Gardeners website ([extension.wsu.edu/skagit/mg/](http://extension.wsu.edu/skagit/mg/)) and click on newspaper articles for an archive on subjects such as “Till or No Till,” “Raised Bed Gardening,” “Straw Bale Gardening,” “Prepping, Planning and Planting Your Vegetable Garden,” and “Harvesting and Storing Garden Vegetables,” among others. Other good online resources are the Washington State University Extension information sheets EM057E “Home Vegetable Gardening in Washington” that will give you charts, illustrations and definitions of vegetable gardening terms and FS115E “Growing Food on Parking Strips and in Front Yard Gardens,”

Enjoy working with Mother Nature and partaking of her bounty!

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

### **RESOURCES:**

- “Home Vegetable Gardening in Washington.” EM057E. Carol Miles, Vegetable Extension Specialist. WSU Department of Agriculture. Published February 2013. <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2071/2014/04/Home-Vegetable-Gardening-in-WA-EM057E.pdf>
- “Growing Food on Parking Strips and in Front Yard Gardens.” FS115E. Craig Cogger, Extension Soil Specialist. WSU Puyallup Research and Extension Center. Published September 2013. <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2071/2014/04/Grow-Food-on-Parking-Strips-and-Front-Yard-FS115E.pdf>
- “Planning and Starting a Vegetable Garden.” Marie Iannotti. The Spruce. October 16, 2019. <https://www.thespruce.com/planning-and-starting-a-vegetable-garden-1403184>
- “Vegetable Gardening for Beginners.” Catherine Boeckmann. “The Old Farmer’s Almanac.” January 18, 2019. [https://www.nobleneighbors.com/uploads/2/8/3/6/28368425/vegetable\\_gardening\\_for\\_beginners.pdf](https://www.nobleneighbors.com/uploads/2/8/3/6/28368425/vegetable_gardening_for_beginners.pdf)
- “Dirt Therapy – 8 Reasons You Need to Have a Garden.” Laurie Neverman. “Common Sense Home.” February 2, 2016. <https://commonsensehome.com/dirt-therapy/>