

Vegetable Gardening Basics - Part I

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In the last 2 years, primarily due to the Covid Pandemic, the Master Gardener program has had more than the normal number of inquiries about vegetable gardening. This 2-part series will help you with starting your own vegetable garden. And you can then find out how rewarding this experience can be.

Why grow vegetables

- They are more nutritious and more flavorful as you can pick them when they are ripe.
- You therefore eat healthier as you add more salads & veggies to your menu.
- It is safer as you control the chemicals, and you can even be an organic grower.
- You get exercise while tending the garden.
- There is a definitely sense of accomplishment that comes with a garden.
- It can be therapeutic just walking in the garden & watching things grow.
- You can save money on groceries? However, not at first, as there are startup expenses.
- It can be a source of beauty as you plant ornamentals (pollinators) as well as edibles.
- You can share the bounty of the harvest with friends and relatives or preserve the extra by freezing, canning, drying - so you can eat well all winter.
- You can share experience with children or grandchildren – our future stewards of the earth.

Planning is Important

- Ask yourself - How much space do I have?
- How much produce do I want?
- You need to acquire the necessary tools to work in the garden.
- Be realistic about what you can do – it is important to start small and stay simple.
- Put your ideas down on paper and ask other gardeners with experience to offer advice.
- Read books, use science-based resources (.edu sites) on the internet, call or email the WSU Master Gardener program with questions when you can't find an answer.
- Keep a garden journal to know what worked and what didn't.

Selecting a site Needs include:

- 8-10 hours of direct sun light. Avoid being near trees because of shade to the plants & the roots compete for nutrients
- Well drained soil. Avoid low wet spots – plants don't like wet feet.
- Good air circulation. Avoid areas that get high winds.
- A level spot is easiest (if you do terrace - use a south facing slope.)
- Avoid low areas as cold air can be trapped.
- Assure it is convenient to a water source.
- It nice to have it close to your kitchen and the garden tools.
- Avoid areas near a busy road, dust from car traffic can coat the plant leaves and slow down their transpiration.
- Keep in mind crop rotation is important with certain plants.
- You can choose to test the soil – pH and available nutrients — to assure the soil is good for gardening. This can be done at the Master Gardener clinic

Choose a garden style – this depends on your available space

- Traditional style is orderly narrow single rows with plants in line with one another and you will need to rotate between rows or have a path that needs to be free of weeds
- Wide row planting is where the plants are alternated. You need to know diameter of the mature plant; you want them to touch but not overlap. Sprawling plants can be trellised.
- Raised beds have many advantages: the soil warms up faster for better growth; there is no deep digging required; there is better control of soil amendments; good drainage is naturally provided; the use of space is more efficient; it is easier to water and weed, you don't have to bend as you can sit on the seat edge to plant, weed, and harvest; you can have uprights that allow for application of shade cloth, plastic sheeting for frost protection, or netting for bird control; you can more easily do successive crops; and it lends itself to square foot gardening
The disadvantages include: the cost of materials at first; it may be a bit labor intensive to build and is semi-permanent.
- What are the choices for raised beds: Materials that can be used for raised beds include: wood, stone, cement blocks or just mound up the soil. The size is best at 3' wide and at least 10-12" deep. The shape is often rectangular but can be square, triangular, or circular
- The amount of space between rows is optional (wheel borrow space or just walking room)

- The path between the beds again has many choices – with bare soil you will get weeds. Choices include: grass that you will need to water and mow; wet layered newspaper and add lawn clippings; steppable thyme for small areas is costly and takes time to fill in; you can put down weed barrier such as black plastic and add wood chips, shredded bark, pine needles, etc. However, it must be renewed periodically. A more costly and permanent option would-be bricks, pavers, or gravel.
- Flower beds. If you don't have space for a garden and small need for vegetables use the beds that usually surround a home or the perimeter of the yard but be sure to look at shading patterns with warm weather crops on south side, cool weather on the north side. Plants can be interspersed between perennials and even annuals - assure the taller plants are placed in back and the shorter ones in front. You can place sprawling vegetables on a trellis or fence.
- Container pots on patio, deck, driveway border, can be used as well. The pots can be from all kinds of materials – plastic, clay, metal, etc. When choosing pots know that clay pots need more water than plastic, and small pots need more water than larger pots. It is important to have a tray beneath for water drainage, roots need oxygen and will rot standing in water and you need to water more when hot weather approaches
- Existing lawn can become a garden area; however, it is more intensive to remove sod, rototill, and amend the soil. One technique is called the Lasagna method (also called sheet compost) where a year before in the fall, lay down wet newspaper in overlapping sheets, pile on yard debris - grass clippings, leaves, let it decompose over the winter and add topsoil in the spring and you will be ready to garden

Part II of Vegetable Gardening on June 5th will go into detail on soil, making compost, planting the garden, watering, fertilizing, weed control and harvesting. Again if you have any gardening questions feel free to contact our Master Gardener clinic or stop by our booth at the downtown Farmer's Market.