

# Planning your Spring Garden

by Gini Obert

**W**hen it still feels like winter with low daytime temps and there is a cold wind blowing, it is time to start planning our vegetable gardens. There is never enough time during the heat of the summer to do this planning. In the summer we may think of the garden as a lot of hard work. Our memories might be of weeding long rows of veggies on hot summer days or of back breaking labor that is supposed to build character. Planning now will assure us that we will grow what we want to eat, in an efficient way that produces mouthwatering delicious food. We will be using fun techniques that minimize those awful tasks we do not like to do. We need a plan that gives us what we want to eat, that meets our physical and time requirements, and that does not overwhelm us. The joy of vegetable gardening can truly be yours.

Begin with the end in mind. Following that principal, here are a few activities to help you visualize your ideal food garden.

List all the vegetables, berries, and fruits you love to eat. Don't forget herbs. It could be helpful to browse a seed catalogue. Do not include all those foods you and your family do not care for. Your list may narrow after you gather more information.

List all the gardening activities you hate to do. Weeding might be at the top of others' lists but yours might be dragging garden hoses to change water, double digging heavy compacted soil, or fighting the heat of the summer. Only things that make gardening miserable should go on this list.

List all your growing locations. You might have a South facing fence that could be used as a trellis, some large pots on a terrace or just a South facing kitchen windowsill. Do a mental walk of your property thinking about light, water, and growing conditions. Visualize all the possible growing spaces even if it is growing among your existing plants, but keep in mind you need 6-8 hours of sunlight. Your garden does not have to be the standard square plot.

If you had a garden last year, evaluate your garden space and the results of your growing efforts. Evaluate the planting locations, soil quality, temperature and light conditions and the availability and volume of water. If you had a garden journal and or maps, dust them off and make a list of the things you want to change.

Your final task is to think about time, cost, and quality of life items. Do you have physical limitations? How much time do you want to spend in the garden? Do your wants fit your budget? Be realistic so that your gardening experience is joyful rather than a job you do not want to face.

Now it is time to create your perfect garden vision. "Begin with the end in mind". Sketch a map of your space with actual dimensions. If using pots, list the size, location, and number of containers. You will be using these maps through this growing seasons. These maps will be used to record crop location, and number of plants and dates planted. You will use them for placement patterns, succession, and companion planting as well as crop rotation. You will also want an irrigation map. These maps should be stored in a journal to guide you from year to year. Garden journals can simply be a notebook that you can easily take with you to the garden area or could be set up as a spread sheet with Excel. They could include photos, where and when you purchased plants or seeds and companies you prefer.



Now that you know where you are planting your garden, you need to decide what you are going to plant. From your original crop list, choose favorite varieties that are appropriate for your planting areas. If using pots, consider varieties that seed companies recommend for growing in small areas. Take your time and study many garden catalogs as there is a lot of information that will guide you. Some catalogs even give you extra tips that can make you more successful. Be sure to also read the back side of seed



packets that will give you germination times, how deep to plant seeds, if the crop needs full sun and how many days till you can harvest. There is a lot of information to know before planting that will make your life easier and reward you with amazing vegetables.

Now about that 'things you hate list' you made. If you wrote that you hate the hot summer sun, plan on doing your gardening chores early in the morning or in the cool of the evening. Set up some seating nearby for those breaks you need. This could be a

beautiful outdoor garden room or simply benches placed in the shade to give you a break. Did you write that your watering system is not the greatest? Ideally the best thing you can do is to set up a drip system so that water gets right to where you want it, and with little effort on your part other than turning on the spout. You could create this yourself but if it seems overwhelming, there are companies who will do this at a cost. If this is not in your budget at present, a few tips could help. Using a thick layer of mulch is great for keeping moisture in your soil, so you do not have to water as often. If you are dragging hoses, invest in some extras so they can be left in place, and you might only have to disconnect one and reconnect another to save work and time. Don't water unless you need to, and only water the amount for each plant's needs. Use a shovel, push it into the soil, and move it forward to see if the soil is actually dry. And about those weeds you wrote about. That heavy layer of mulch to save watering, will deter weeds from coming up, and planting densely can make shade between the rows and deter weeds also. Another tip is to get the weeds while they are young. Those tiny weeds can be easily pulled or rubbed out by using a hula hoe, a favorite of many gardeners. Once weeds get big, they are hard to remove, steal water and nutrients from your garden and might set seeds to make it worse next year.

There is nothing tastier than growing your own food and Master Gardeners are here to help you. Please call our clinic at 509-574-1604. Master Gardener volunteers hold classes during the garden season that cover many garden topics. Watch this column for announcements on topics, times, and locations. They are free. Check the library for beautiful gardening books to give you inspiration, and share ideas with that neighbor who always has a beautiful garden. "Happy Gardening!"