



How to Start a Vegetable Garden

Three Methods: [Understanding Your Climate](#) [Prepping Your Planting Area](#) [Choosing Vegetable Varieties](#)

Growing your own vegetable garden is a rewarding experience that allows you to save money while simultaneously creating a beautiful space in your yard. If you work closely with the land and put in the labor required to grow your own delicious vegetables, you will get an immense amount of satisfaction out of picking your brightly-colored gems and devouring them for dinner. Though planting a vegetable garden is probably easier than you think, there are some definite things to consider when planting a garden for the first time. Follow the instructions below to learn how to get started planting your very own vegetable garden.

Method
1

Understanding Your Climate

1 Find out which USDA Plant Hardiness Zone you live in. Hardiness zones are based on the average minimum winter temperature in a given area and are divided into categories separated by 10-degrees Fahrenheit. They can tell you which plants will thrive in your area and which plants will not do well in the climate of your area. Additionally, you can find out when the best time of year to plant is based on your hardiness zone. Visit <http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/> to find out which zone you live in. The interactive map will even display information about microclimates in your yard.^[1]

2 Choose a spot with at least six hours of direct sunlight per day. Most vegetables require a lot of sunlight to grow into healthy producers, but you may want to vary the sun to shade ratio of your garden to allow for some shade growing plants as well. However, if your vegetables don't get enough sun, they won't produce as much and will be more susceptible to pests. It's best to have an idea about what plants you want to grow before choosing a site.^[2]

- You can grow dark, leafy vegetables like broccoli and spinach in places in your garden that do not get full sun. If you live in an area with little sun, don't be discouraged. You can still plant a magnificent garden, though you'll probably have to leave tomatoes out of the equation.
- Alternately, if you live in an extremely hot climate, you may want to choose partial shade for some of your vegetable varieties in order to protect them from extreme heat. For example, cool-season peas may benefit from growing in partial shade.^[3]

Method
2

Prepping Your Planting Area

1 Choose your garden foundation. Decide whether you want to plant your vegetable garden directly in the ground or build a planter box to raise your vegetables a few feet above the ground. Alternately, you may want to plant different vegetable varieties each in their own pot. Your decision should depend on the quality of your soil and the tendency of your planting area to flood. If you have poor soil quality and poor drainage, you probably want to build a [raised vegetable garden bed](#).

- Think about how big you want your planting bed to be. Depending on the type of vegetables you plant, you'll need to make sure that the box is wide and deep enough. Conduct a bit of research on the types of vegetables you are planting to see how much space they need to grow. Broccoli, for example, utilizes a wide area to grow, while carrots simply need space to grow down.
- To build a raised planting bed, you can use lumber, plastic, synthetic wood, bricks, or rocks. However, cedar planks are generally recommended because they do not rot when exposed to water. Keep in mind that your vegetable plants will have to be watered regularly, and some weak woods like simple plywood may not last very long when constantly drenched.
- Round the top of your planting bed to achieve the maximum surface area for planting. This means that the tops are rounded to form an arc rather than a flat surface.^[4]
- Lay a barrier between the bed and the ground in order to prevent weeds from growing. You can use gardening

plastic, a mat of some sort, or several layers of newspaper and/or cardboard to reduce the chance that weeds will grow.

2 Till the soil. Most vegetables require a rich, fertile, fluffy soil to grow well. Use a quality garden hoe and/or a shovel to intensely break up the soil and prepare it for planting. You can avoid this labor altogether if you choose to build a raised vegetable garden box and fill it with pre-mixed, store-bought soil.

- Make sure your planting area is free of any rocks or clumps of thick soil to allow the roots to expand and your seedlings to grow into healthy, productive plants.
- Be sure to remove any weeds or unwanted voluntary plants from your growing space. These will just compete with your plants for space and can potentially bring in harmful pests.

3 Test the pH of the soil. Soil pH is based on a scale of 1 to 14, with a pH of 7.0 being neutral, any values below 7.0 being acidic, and any values above 7.0 being alkaline. Most vegetables like a slightly acidic soil between 6.0 and 6.5. Soil that is too acidic will damage plant roots and cause your vegetables to under produce. [Test your soil's pH](#) by visiting your county's agricultural extension office and obtaining the necessary testing supplies and instructions. You can also pay to have your soil tested.

- The pH of the soil tells you if the soil needs limestone added in order to bring it to the desired pH value. Limestone is cheap and effective when it comes to improving soil.
- Evaluate the soil's calcium and magnesium levels in order to determine what type of limestone to add to your soil. If the soil is low in magnesium, add dolomitic limestone. If it is high in magnesium, add calcitic limestone.
- Add the limestone two to three months before planting to allow the soil to absorb it. After adding, check the pH again. You will probably need to add limestone to the soil every year or two to maintain a proper pH level.^[5]

4 Fertilize the soil. Most vegetables like soil that is rich in organic matter. You can increase the fertility of your soil by adding peat moss, mature compost, blood meal, fish emulsion, etc. The most common fertilizers recommended for vegetable gardens specifically are nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium.

- Try one of these common fertilizer compositions in your vegetable garden: one pound of a 10-10-10 fertilizer or two pounds of a 5-10-5 fertilizer per 100 feet (30.5 m) of garden. The first number refers to the percentage by weight of nitrogen, the second number explains the percentage by weight of phosphorus, and the third number denotes the percentage by weight of potassium.
- Too much nitrogen can damage the plants, however, causing a reduction in production yield. Alternately, too much phosphorus can increase the chances of chlorosis.
- You can also add iron, copper, manganese, and zinc in small amounts to nourish the soil.^[6]

5 Water the soil thoroughly. Most vegetables do not fare very well in times of drought. Make sure to water the soil before planting your vegetables seeds or seedlings and keep the bed moist throughout the growing process.

Method
3

Choosing Vegetable Varieties

1 Know when to plant. Most vegetables are planted outside around the last spring frost and are harvested anywhere between mid-summer and late-fall. Consult the specific growing instructions for each type of vegetable that you grow. To enjoy a wide variety of vegetables for the entire growing season, plant vegetables that are ready for harvest at different times of the year. That way, you won't be without fresh vegetables for long.

2 Know how much to plant. Often, new gardeners get over-excited about their new hobby and end up planting more than they can eat or care for. Be aware that some plants, like tomatoes, peppers, and squash produce throughout an entire growing season, and others like carrots, radishes, and corn, produce only once.^[7]

- For best results, plant a mixture of continual producing and single producing vegetables in your garden. Generally, you can plant less of the continual producing vegetables and more of the single producing vegetables in order to achieve a good balance in your garden.
- Make sure you give each plant enough space to develop and thrive in your garden. You may have to thin plants out as they begin to grow in order to avoid crowding.

3 Ask your family which vegetables they love to eat. Keep your family's favorite vegetables in mind when planting your vegetable garden. By growing the produce you buy the most of, you can greatly reduce your grocery store costs.

4 Consider growing vegetables that are hard to find. Many grocery stores only carry the produce basics. Often grocery stores simply carry one variety of a tomato or a pepper, making it hard to find interesting heirloom or exotic varieties. If your climate permits, consider planting vegetables that are difficult to locate for purchase in your area. Not only will doing so allow you to cook with special vegetables, it also provides you with a great gift to give to your friends, family, and neighbors.

5 Avoid plants that animals and pests in your area will eat. Be aware of the different vegetables that your local fauna will love to devour. To protect your vegetables from birds or deer, you may have to put up some sort of fence covering around your vegetable garden to prevent it from getting attacked by veggie-seeking predators.

6 Decide whether to grow from seed or transplant seedlings. Most vegetables can be grown from seeds or bought as seedlings and transferred directly into the ground or a planter box.

- While some vegetables like carrots are very easy to grow from seed, others like tomatoes can be a bit more difficult. Research the process for planting each type of vegetable from seed before choosing a planting method.
- You may also want to start seeds indoors in peat pots before transplanting seedlings in the garden. Consult a growing guide for each vegetable in order to figure out planting times and the temperature that most vegetables can withstand.

7 Space your plants adequately. While some gardening guides suggest planting in rows, others suggest that planting each vegetable type in a triangular shape actually allows you to preserve space in the garden. The important thing, though, is that your plants are not planted too tightly together to prevent them having to compete with neighboring plants for space.^[8]

8 Learn how to care for your specific plants. Each type of vegetable plant requires a slightly, if not drastically, different care routine. Do a bit of research to find out how much water your plants need, whether or not they require trimming or thinning, how often they need to be fertilized, and when they are ready for harvest.

Can you answer these readers' questions?

 Refresh

On **How to Grow a Sunflower in a Pot**, a reader asks:

During what part of growing season does the sunflower grow the most?

Your answer...

Reply

On **How to Perform a 1031 Exchange**, a reader asks:

How long until the owner can move into the property as owner-occupied after the exchange closes?

Your answer...

Reply

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Are there any steps that you must follow before you send someone to a collection agency?

Your answer...

Reply

Tips

- Weeding early on is very important as weeds steal light, water and nutrients that should be getting to your vegetables.
- In the early days of a vegetable garden, all your plants are vulnerable to attack. Plant in bulk to ensure some survive, and take measures against pests.
- Use netting can be used to prevent animals from eating plants.

Sources and Citations

1. <http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/Default.aspx>
2. http://www.eatingwell.com/food_news_origins/seasonal_local/gardening/how_to_start_a_vegetable_garden
3. <http://www.bhg.com/gardening/vegetable/vegetables/planning-your-first-vegetable-garden/>

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