

VEGETABLE GARDENING BASICS

Growing food for yourself and others is so rewarding. Vegetables fresh-picked from your garden are at their peak of flavor and nutrition. You can be sure your food is free of harmful chemicals and you cut the distance it travels from plant to plate, reducing your impact on the environment. And there is pride and joy in eating and, even better, sharing your garden's harvest.

Vegetable gardening is easy even for beginners and you don't need a lot of land or even a dedicated space to produce a steady harvest from spring to fall. Many varieties can be tucked into ornamental beds or grown in containers. Wherever you grow, the general guidelines for the most popular garden vegetables are the same. *Let's start with those.*

Site Selection

Vegetable plants that bear fruit, such as tomatoes and cucumbers, do best where they get eight or more hours a day of direct sunlight at the peak of summer. Lettuces and other salad greens, spinach, cabbage, and herbs can fare well with more shade. Drainage is vitally important for vegetable plants—constantly soggy soil causes their roots to rot. Choose a spot where rainstorms don't leave behind slow-drying puddles.

Soil Prep

You can ensure a vegetable garden drains well by setting up raised beds. They shed excess water quickly and they discourage foot traffic, which squeezes the water channels out of the soil and leave it compacted. Whether you want to grow vegetables in raised beds and among your ornamentals, mix compost into the soil before you plant. Compost feeds your crops gradually, activates the beneficial microbes in the soil, balances the soil's pH, and protects the plants from soil-borne diseases. If you buy bagged soil for containers, avoid products with synthetic fertilizers blended in.

Planting Time

The best conditions for planting vegetables are overcast skies and a light rainfall in the forecast. Moisten but don't soak the soil before you sow seeds or settle in transplants.

Feeding Naturally

Most vegetables benefit from weekly fertilizing after they start growing leaves until they begin to form fruit. Liquid fish-and-seaweed fertilizer makes it easy to feed plants when you water them and it provides nutrients in their natural form, the way roots have adapted to absorb them. Synthetic fertilizers (*typically made with urea or ammonium nitrate*) lead to vigorous but unsustainable growth, and they can harm earthworms and other important forms of soil life.

Watering Wisely

Seedlings need consistent moisture when they are getting established, but you want to water deeply but infrequently as your plants grow taller. This encourages them to form a deep and wide root system, which helps the plants be sturdy and strong. Morning is the best time to water, if possible, so the plants can soak it up while they are gathering sunlight. As much as you can, water the soil around the plants and not their leaves.

Pest Management

The food chain is your most valuable ally in pest control. Set up a bird bath near your garden to attract insect-eating species. Grow herbs and flowers, such as dill and sweet alyssum, in or around your vegetables to lure in beneficial insects that prey on pests. Row covers and other barriers can protect your vegetables from infestations. Insecticidal soap and Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis, a naturally occurring bacteria that prevents insects from feeding*) are two safe, nontoxic products for managing serious pest problems. The best protection from the diseases that can afflict vegetable crops is to choose varieties with natural resistance. Check seed packets and plant labels for information on disease-resistance.



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VEGETABLE FAVORITES

Tomatoes, Peppers, and Eggplant

Variety options: For the best flavor, go with beefsteaks, such as 'Big Beef' or 'Brandywine' (a local heirloom). 'Celebrity' is a productive and reliable mid-size tomato. Look for "bush" or "determinate" varieties for planting in containers—they stay compact. Cherry tomatoes such as 'Sweet Million' and 'Sun Gold' bear bushels of fruit for all summer. With peppers, you can choose from sweet bell types or spicy varieties such as jalapenos. 'Jimmy Nardello' is a popular sweet frying pepper. Eggplant comes in the familiar roundish purple varieties such as 'Black Beauty' and long lavender, green, or white Asian types like 'Green Knight'.

How to start: Seedlings you buy at a nursery or home center are the easiest way to start these crops. If you want to grow your own from seed, sow them indoors about six weeks before the last frost date in spring.

When to plant: These warm-weather crops should go into your garden in mid-spring, after the threat of frost has passed. (You find out your area's average last frost date from your county extension office.)

Lettuce, Spinach, and Other Salad Greens

Variety options: "Cut-and-come again" leaf lettuces let you harvest a steady supply for weeks on end. Romaine lettuce is more heat-tolerant than other types. 'Bloomsdale Long-Standing' spinach is very reliable and slow to bolt (turn bitter and produce seeds). Mesclun mix produces a variety of tender and colorful greens.

How to start: All of these plants grow readily from seeds. You also can buy and transplant lettuce and spinach seedlings, if you prefer.

When to plant: All of these crops grow best in cool temperatures and tend to burn out at the peak of summer. Plant them in early spring (when nighttime temperatures are above 40 degrees F). You can also sow the seeds in late summer for a fall crop.

Beans and Peas

Variety options: Pole beans like 'Kentucky Wonder' reach more than 6 feet tall and they need supports to stay upright. 'Blue Lake' and other bush bean varieties are more compact. Dried types, such as kidney or pinto beans, take

all season to grow before they mature in late summer to early fall. Peas—with or without edible pods—come in pole and bush types, too. 'Maestro' is a popular shelling variety. For snow peas, 'Oregon Giant' is the standard choice.

How to start: Sow seeds directly in the garden.

When to plant: Peas fare best in cool weather, so plant them in early spring when nighttime temperatures stay above 45°F. They can take a couple weeks (or more) to poke up through the soil. Wait to sow bean seeds until nighttime temperatures reach 60 degrees F. Plant beans and peas again in late summer for fall harvest.

Cucumbers, Squash, and Melons

Variety options: These are all members of the large and diverse cucurbit family. With cucumbers, you can choose between salad or pickling varieties. Squash come in soft-skinned summer types, such as zucchini, or hard-shelled storage varieties, including acorn, butternut, and pumpkin.

How to start: Start seeds indoors or buy transplants.

When to plant: Wait until after the last frost date in spring to sow seeds or move seedlings to the garden. To grow your own seedlings indoors, start no more than four weeks before the last frost date—these are fast-growing plants.

Broccoli, Cabbage, Cauliflower, and Brussels Sprouts

Variety options: Many gardeners seek out disease-resistant varieties of cole crops (or members of the cabbage family). 'Green Comet' broccoli is a fast-maturing type. Cabbage varieties may be round and dense, long and barrel-shaped, or crinkle-leaved. 'Snow Crown' cauliflower is self-blanching, meaning its leaves naturally cover the head and keep it white. 'Jade Cross' brussels sprouts is a traditional favorite for its reliability.

How to start: Start seeds indoors or buy transplants.

When to plant: Move transplants to the garden when daytime temperatures are consistently 60 degrees F or warmer. Sow seeds inside about six weeks earlier.





POTAGER STYLE

Vegetable beds can be as attractive as ornamental gardens if you apply the design principles of the French potager, or kitchen garden.

Raised Beds and Pathways

Grow your vegetables in raised beds framed with rot-resistant woods like cedar or cypress or with brick. You can vary the shapes of the beds but be sure they are no more than 4 feet wide so you can reach into them without stepping on the soil. Leave pathways between them wide enough for a wheelbarrow.

Plant Variety

Include dwarf or espalier fruit trees, shrubs, flowers, and herbs among the vegetable beds. These plants will also attract beneficial insects that prey on pests.

Structures

Arbors, trellises, tuteurs, and other structures lift plants up and add the dimension of height to the garden. Be sure to include a bench where the gardeners and guests can admire the view.

Enclosure

Define the boundaries of the garden with shrubs, such as boxwood or elderberries, or with low fencing.

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