

Alternatively, vegetables can be grown randomly throughout the entire garden. This is a more natural situation and tends to favour vigorous stock and excellent produce. Weak or substandard vegetables will eventually be overwhelmed by the healthier plants surrounding them. Try to mix in companion plants that can help deter pests or encourage growth. "Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of Companion Planting for Successful Gardening" by Louise Riotte is the bible of companion planting. This type of planting offers better protection against insect pests, mainly because the attractive signals are weakened or confused and the increased distances between each plant deter colonization.

Rotate annual vegetables, such as carrots, broccoli, and potatoes, to a different growing space each season. This helps prevent soil disease, pest infestation, and enables soil replenishment during a fallow period that is scheduled between each sequence of crop rotation. Perennial vegetables like asparagus continue producing for a second and third season. They tend to be low maintenance, and new shoots grow quickly to replace stalks that are removed.

Step 5: Fertilize Organically

You may want to fertilize your garden with another layer of compost alongside the rows of vegetables. Avoid spraying for insects, even using organic or natural pesticides, because when you kill the so-called "bad pests" you also drive away the beneficial insects that you want in your garden. You are also killing off the food for butterflies and birds that cross-pollinate your plants and eat the "bad pests". Encourage beneficial insects by planting flowers with small blossoms nearby as their nectar feeds these insects.

Step 6: Watch your garden grow

Pull weeds the old fashioned way. Let the rest take its course. There is always a quiet sense of fulfillment when home grown food is delivered to the table. Maintaining this positive outlook helps overcome minor setbacks and ensures that growing vegetables is an enjoyable rather than laborious effort.

Adapted from articles by Barbara Kessler, www.greenrightnow.com and Derek Walton, www.organicguide.com

On line Resources:

How to grow papers for common vegetables, fruits and herbs in North America:

www.farm-garden.com

www.organicgardening.com

General info: www.gardeningknowhow.com/category/organic

Canadian heritage seed companies and Canadian Seed Catalogue Inventory:

www.seeds.ca:

Books

www.rodalestore.com

www.torontopubliclibrary.ca

Toronto resources

www.grassrootsstore.com: books, seeds, seedlings and soil amendments in season

www.leevalley.com: books, tools

www.uharvest.ca: seeds, seedlings and soil amendments

Starting an Organic Vegetable Garden



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Organic gardening uses the logic that nature put in place. It's that simple. In nature, falling leaves, dead grass and other organic matter feed the soil, which in turn feeds the plants. With the greater resources available from good soil, the plant's natural defenses against disease and pests become stronger. This results in their producing more aromatic compounds which means better fruit with more flavor and more micronutrients. So in organic gardening, to follow nature's lead, feed and nurture the soil.

Step 1: Site the garden

Sun, sun and sun! A summer vegetable garden should receive no less than six hours of full sun a day and preferably eight or more. Gardens don't thrive in shade. Vine growing vegetables in particular require lots of sun to ripen properly. If your sun is marginal, beans and leafy greens such as lettuce can handle some shade.

Good drainage. A gentle slope is a good spot if the erosion is under control. Otherwise, build in drainage by creating raised beds. As you walk around the beds, the beds remain raised and well aerated. It is better to avoid heavy clay soils which can become sodden, particularly in flat or low-lying sites. Continuous water logging is likely to damage plants by restricting oxygen absorption at the roots. Root vegetables in particular like loose airy soil.

Size. A 5 foot by 5 foot garden is a nice size to grow a couple items. A 20x20 garden can yield a bounty of diverse produce that will keep the kitchen cooks busy for the summer.

If you need to kill off sod to create a garden spot, cover the sod with plastic sheeting and "bake" the grass over a few weeks. Seal the plastic with bricks or rocks or dig a trench around the area and push the plastic into the trench, cover the top edges with dirt or rocks. The turf should come up easily after this treatment and makes good compost. No chemicals needed.

Step 2: Feed the soil

If you have the time and the muscle, double digging your new garden helps spread nutrients deep in the soil where many roots reach. You only need to do it one time. Dig a row about 18 inches wide and a shovel blade deep along the length of one side. Then dig a shovel depth below that and put this soil aside separately. Dig the next row beside this and put the top soil in the trench previously dug. Mix in some manure or compost. Dig down another shovel blade deep in the second trench and pile this soil on top of the soil you just put in the first trench. Continue doing this row after row until you empty the final row. Now put the top soil you put aside in the bottom of the final trench and the bottom level soil you put aside on top of it to finish the digging. Spread a lot of composted manure and compost on top of your newly dug garden and dig it in. You now have rich garden soil over 2 feet deep.

If this is too much work (and it probably is), you can get good results by adding a layer of two to three inches of enriching compost to your native earth. Work the compost into the soil using a garden fork or tiller until the amended soil is about 8 inches deep. The worms will help bring nutrients deeper over time.

Find good compost at a local organic nursery. Even better, begin a compost pile in a corner of your backyard. Your first rudimentary compost pile can be very simple. Begin by defining a small area to leave your grass clippings. Add the fruit and vegetable matter you would put in your green bin.

Cover with dirt. Add more clippings and kitchen waste. Water. Get more ambitious as you learn more, but take comfort that you've taken the first step, which is to not send good, useable organic material to the landfill.

If where you are working has been chemically treated, consider adding a soil tonic or activator to increase the natural microorganisms living and working in the soil. They will break down the chemicals and help purify the area before planting.

Step 3: Create the beds

Vegetables like a soft spot in well-drained soil. A suggestion is building raised beds that are 9 to 12 inches deep, using a 50-50 mix of compost and soil. The raised beds do not have to be boxed in, but can be built up in 4-foot wide rows about 10 feet long. You don't have to plant vegetables in a long row, farmer-style. Plant crosswise or horizontally on long raised rows, making the vegetables reachable from either side.

You can make the raised beds in a variety of shapes, squares about 5 feet by 5 feet with walking paths around them will create a nice compact garden, which some experts say works well because the rows of produce shelter each other. (For example, you might have herbs on an outside row, with vegetables that need protection toward the inner part of the square. For more on this style of garden, consult Rodale's All-New Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening: The Indispensable Resource for Every Gardener.)

You could also plant circular beds using the three sisters method which places corn in the center, pole beans around the corn and squash around the outside. The beans climb the corn stalks and enrich the soil for the corn. The squash spreads out at the base acting as mulch and helps keep raccoons away.

Step 4: Plant!

Planning what you want to grow and eat is truly the fun part. Make sure you've got the season right. Lettuce, spinach, peas, beets, radishes, carrots and anything in the cabbage family can be planted in late April as soon as the soil can be worked. They like the cooler weather. Warm weather seeds such as beans, corn and squash or warm weather transplants such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplants should wait for around Victoria Day or so.

For a beginner's summer garden, tomatoes are a given. They are relatively easy to grow and bring that big reward of a tomato that actually tastes like something you won't find at most grocery stores. To keep things interesting, it is a great idea to supplement a small selection of well known vegetables with at least one exotic species each season.

Consult either a nursery expert you trust, a good book or website. Even better, talk to your neighbours. They often have experience as to what works best in your local micro-climate and how to handle your particular pests. Check the variety of plant so you can get the right one for your weather. Work backwards from the date mature crops are needed or frost is expected in your area. Keep a calendar of activities, to learn from and adjust season to season.

A traditional pattern of planting is plants arranged neatly in rows in a designated plot. This requires some extra preparation and maintenance but enables early growth to be monitored. Weaker plants can be periodically removed to reduce the competition for light, moisture, and soil nutrients.