



Vegetable Gardening Basics

By Carol Quish, UConn Home & Garden Center



Growing your own food is an idealistic and perhaps, instinctual urge. Starting with good gardening information will ensure your dream of cultivating the back forty doesn't die.

Location. Most plants need full sun, which means six to eight hours of direct sunlight each day. To determine how much sun your yard actually receives, watch it. Take one whole, sunny day to monitor when the sunlight hits the particular spot you are hoping to place a garden. Trees and buildings will cast shadows as the sun moves. If there is less than six hours of sun, leaf crops like spinach, kale and lettuce can be grown. Full sun will be needed for crops that produce fruits like tomato, squash or cucumber.

Soil. Have a soil test done in the location you intend to cultivate. Determine the area, then take eight to twelve slices of soil with a shovel from different sections of the soon to be garden. Slices should include the surface of the soil down to a six inch depth as this where the future plants' roots will dwell. Mix all soil slices together in a clean bucket. Remove one cup to deliver or mail to UConn Soil Nutrient Analysis Lab (www.soiltest.uconn.edu) for a pH and nutrient test. The cost of a soil test is \$12.00. Soil test results and recommendations will be mailed or emailed to you in about two weeks. The pH of most native Connecticut soils is typically between 4.5 and 5.5 because of the types of rocks that make up our soils. Most vegetables require a pH of 6.0 to 7.0 for good growth and production. Limestone is often recommended to raise the pH, but amount to use can only be accurately determined through testing.

Preparation. If the new garden location has other plants growing on it, remove them. For lawns use a sod cutter or spade to remove as much of the grass, including roots as possible. If turf is rototilled, grass will regrow and you will be weeding it out for years. After any plants are removed, add recommended amendments and till in to incorporate throughout the soil.

Another option to kill grass is to smother it. Cover it with cardboard or complete sections or thick newspaper, blocking all light from the plants. Cover the layer with compost or topsoil a couple of inches thick. Over time the grass, roots and all will decompose leaving a place for planting. Use a thicker layer of mix of compost and topsoil over the cardboard to plant into directly and grow as the grass is rotting away below.

Define the garden with a fence to keep hungry animals out. Raised beds can be made with 12-inch wide boards from Douglas fir, cedar, hemlock or locust wood. These boards will last for at least 10 years even when placed directly on the soil. Cement blocks or bricks are another alternative to containing soil in beds.

Size. Start small. Dreams of great bushels of produce are something to aspire to - just not in the first year. Success early on will encourage gardeners to continue planting and expanding in the future. Gardening requires a fair amount of physical effort and time. If the first year is manageable, add on the next. Fifty square feet is a good size to begin.



What to plant. Easy spring vegetables are radishes, peas and lettuce from seed, and onion sets. Spring vegetables like it cool, and will not tolerate the heat of summer. Seed packets often give the directions for cool crops to be planted as soon as the soil can be worked in early spring. Do not work wet soil as this will cause compaction. To determine if the soil is dry enough, take a handful of soil and shape it into a ball with your hands. If it holds its shape, poke it with your finger. If it falls apart like crumbling chocolate cake, the soil is ready to be worked. If the poke just leaves an indentation, the soil is too wet. Wait until the soil dries out more.

Warm weather crops include tomatoes, peppers, squash and beans. They are not planted until after the danger of frost has past. Planting a tomato seedling into cold soil will shock its roots and reduce its production for the life of the plant. Better to wait until the end of May to plant warm season crops.

Fall crops can repeat the cooler season spring rotation of crops. These should be started in the garden during late July and August. Beets, kale, chard and lettuce will tolerate frosts.

Varieties. Vegetable plants have their fair share of diseases and insect pests. It makes sense to select varieties that have tolerance or resistance to common diseases. These would be noted as such in catalogs and on websites. Also, select vegetables that you and your family enjoy eating.

Try your hand at growing some vegetables this year. There's nothing like picking that sun-warmed, home grown tomato and popping it in your mouth. For more information on vegetable gardening or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.