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Vegetable Gardening

There are few things more satisfying than growing fruits and vegetables and enjoying delicious, fresh, homegrown products of your own garden. Here are some guidelines and tips for growing a bountiful and healthy vegetable garden.

Light

Sunlight, at least 6 hours or more a day for most vegetables is necessary for good production and yields. Some fruits and vegetables can take much less sun, however. Berry fruits like raspberry and blueberry, lettuce, and some herbs can grow well in 4 hours of sun. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants need the most sun.

Good Soil

Well-amended, loose soil that is high in organic matter and drains well is best for vegetables. Raised beds and containers are a great way to provide this because you have optimum control over soil quality. Fill your raised beds with topsoil and compost blends, preferably organic, such as Daddy Pete's Raised Bed Mix. This mix is also good for container plantings as is our Homewood Professional Planting Mix.

If you want to plant in the ground and have heavy clay, it is beneficial to amend the soil with plenty of pine bark soil conditioner or Permatill as well as compost. Layer 2-3" of pine bark soil conditioner or Permatill and 2" of compost or aged manure over the top of the areas to be planted and till in amendments to at least 6-8 inches or more (up to 10") deep until thoroughly incorporated.

Garden Size

How big should your vegetable garden be? 40 square feet of growing space is probably enough for most home gardeners to keep up with and is enough space to grow a lot of food. If you're very busy, consider only planting half that amount of space. If you're a beginner, it's best to start small, learn the basics, and expand when you're ready. You can always make the garden bigger the next year.

If you are planting in raised beds, three feet is usually the ideal width for a raised bed as it reduces the strain of reaching. If your beds are against a fence or wall, then 2 feet wide will allow you to get to all areas in spite of only being able to work from one side.

Water

Regular water is vital for vegetables. One of the first things a drought-stressed plant sacrifices is its fruit. Quality of fruit (and by "fruit" we mean any fruit produced by a plant regardless of whether it is considered to be a fruit or vegetable) is also negatively affected by drought stress. Tomatoes and melons can stay a little on the dry side once the fruit is ripening for more intense flavor. In other plants, like cucumber, that intensity of flavor translates to bitterness. Drip irrigation makes it easier and more efficient to water. Consider rain capturing devices like rain barrels and cisterns for water conservation and because plants usually do better with rainwater than municipal water.

Fertilizer

Regular applications of organic fertilizers such as Garden-tone™ or Tomato-tone™ will provide best yields. Always apply fertilizer at the rate indicated on the package. Some vegetables, such as tomatoes, are heavy feeders and won't have good yields unless they have an abundant supply of nutrients. Fish & seaweed emulsions such as Neptune's Harvest™ are also great for boosting production. Tomatoes, especially those planted in ground, also require calcium which can be supplied at time of planting by adding some gypsum to the soil.

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Tips

- Mulch is essential to keep down weeds, protect roots from the heat & conserve water. A 2-4" layer is ideal. Make sure the mulch doesn't sit piled up against the stems of plants.
- Organic pest control is safest for edible crops. A basic cupboard of remedies includes Organocide organic spray oil or insecticidal soap for sucking insects like aphids and thrips, Mite-X for spider mites, and spinosad or Bt for caterpillars. ALWAYS read the label and observe any restrictions or precautions for applying, handling, and disposing of pesticides. (The label is the law!) Even though a product is organic, it doesn't mean there aren't important precautions. For example, Organocide spray oil is a very safe product to use around people and pets but it can stain concrete.
- Grow plants such as basil, catmint, dill, oregano, lantana, coneflower, cosmos, salvia, and zinnia, that attract beneficial insects to the garden. Beneficial insects either assist in pollination or are predator insects that will hunt pest insects in your garden.
- Keeping vegetables picked off of plants, helps boost further production, so harvest regularly.
- Consider fencing your garden to keep out deer, rabbits, and other pests. Repellents such as imustgarden's Deer Repellent and Rabbit Repellent can help keep these pests at bay. Deer do not like the scent of rosemary and lavender so try interplanting them or surrounding veggie beds with them.

Growing Tips for Some Popular Vegetables (and Melons)

Beans, Bush - Plant in full sun after danger of frost is past. Small plantings every 10 days provide a long-season of harvest since the harvest of bush beans lasts only a few weeks. Spacing in beds: 8" apart. Watering: medium at flowering; heavy through harvest. Beans have only moderate fertilizer needs. A kelp and fish product such as Neptune's Harvest every 3-4 weeks is sufficient. Best eaten the day they are picked but freeze well.

Beans, Pole - Plant in full sun (for best yields but will tolerate light shade) after danger of frost is past. Provide a trellis, netting, or teepee for the plants to grow on. Spacing in beds: in hills, 16" apart, 4 plants per hill; in rows (for trellises), 3" apart. Watering: medium during flowering; heavy through harvest. Beans have only moderate fertilizer needs. A kelp and fish product such as Neptune's Harvest every 3-4 weeks is sufficient. Regular picking of ripe beans will extend harvest. Pick green and wax beans when pods are about pencil-thick. Pick French or filet beans when they are very slender, about 1/8 inch thick. Best eaten the day they are picked but freeze well.

Cucumbers - Best grown on trellises in full sun after danger of frost is past. Spacing in beds: 18" if trellised, 36" if on ground. Watering: moderate until flowering; heavy from flowering to harvest. Avoid planting near melons. Feed every two weeks with a complete organic fertilizer such as Garden-tone or Neptune's Harvest. Harvest when fruits are young for best flavor and crispness. Yellowing at the blossom end indicates overmature fruit.

Eggplant - Plant in full sun well after danger of frost is past. Eggplant does not like cool temperatures. Spacing in beds: 18". Watering: heavy. A fairly heavy feeder, so feed regularly with a complete organic fertilizer such as Garden-tone or Neptune's Harvest. Asian eggplants often require staking or trellises. Insects love eggplant so be on the lookout for them. Floating row covers (a thin, breathable, spunbound polypropylene fabric) can be used to keep bugs off plants. Can be picked anytime after the fruits have reached half of their mature size. Cut eggplants off the plant with shears and leave some stem attached. Does not store well, so eat soon thereafter.

Leaf Lettuce - A cool-season crop that can be planted in March/April and again in August/September in full sun to part shade. Afternoon shade is beneficial for spring-planted lettuces. Plant heat-tolerant varieties for extended harvest. Spacing in beds: 1/2" apart in bands if planting for continuous harvest; if planting for head production, 8-10" apart. Watering: requires regular water though not a lot of it since it is shallow-rooted. Encourage fast growth (for tender lettuce) by adding plenty of compost to the soil and feed supplementally with Garden-tone or Neptune's Harvest. You can start harvesting outer leaves once they are big enough to eat. Once the central stem starts to form, the plants are finished producing.

Tomatoes - Plant in full sun outdoors after danger of frost is past. Add lime and Tomato-tone to planting hole. Spacing in beds: 15" for supported, 24" for unsupported determinate types; 36" for unsupported indeterminate types. Watering: moderate to high during growth, lower during harvest. Requires regular fertilizer such as Tomato-tone for best production. Rotate location of crop periodically to reduce disease problems. For better production, pinch out suckers that grow out between the main stem and side branches.

Melons - Plant in full sun after danger of frost is past. Try not to disturb the roots when planting. Spacing in beds: 16". Watering: moderate and even until fruit is full size then little to no water while the fruit ripens. Avoid planting near cucumbers and winter squash or the fruit can be bitter. Add lime to beds where the pH falls below 6.0. Use a higher nitrogen fertilizer until flowering begins then switch to a fertilizer with more phosphorus and potassium. 3 digit number sequence, N-P-K ratio, on fertilizer bag lists % of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. On most melons (except watermelon), fruits are ripe when the rind changes from gray-green to yellow-buff. Watermelons "thump" when tapped, underside is yellow, & tendril nearest fruit may turn from green to brown.

Okra - Plant in full sun after danger of frost is past being careful not to disturb the roots. Spacing in beds: 12". Watering: low; water during dry periods. Not a heavy feeder, fertilize once a month with a kelp/fish product such as Neptune's Harvest. Pick pods when they are 2-3 inches long. Best eaten the day it is picked.

Peppers - Plant in full sun after danger of frost is past. Spacing in beds: 12". Watering: moderate and even until fruit starts to set; less as fruit matures. Peppers grow well together and should be planted so that mature plants just touch each other. Peppers can be picked when green or ripe so harvest when fruits are at your preferred stage of ripeness.

Yellow Squash & Zucchini - Plant in full sun after danger of frost is past. Spacing in beds: 12-18". Watering: heavy and even. Feed regularly with a complete organic fertilizer such as Neptune's Harvest. Too much nitrogen can reduce yields. Pick squash often and while it's young and small. Squash blossoms can also be harvested, lightly battered, fried, and filled with soft cheese.