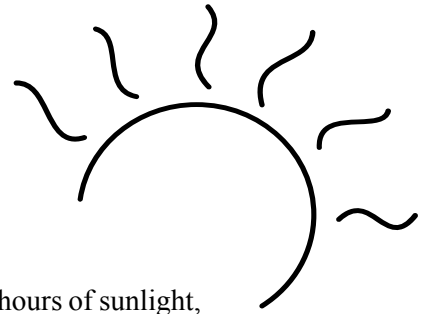


Planning Your Vegetable Garden

The keys to planning a successful vegetable garden are:



- ~ selecting a suitable location for the garden;
- ~ preparing your soil;
- ~ selecting varieties which will work for you;
- ~ knowing when to plant which crops;
- ~ growing the right amount for your needs;
- ~ proper garden layout.



Selecting a Location

Choose the spot with the longest day length possible. Most vegetable crops need at least 6 - 8 hours of sunlight, but the more you can provide the better.

Do not situate your garden near any overhanging tree branches. Not only will they shade your crops, but the tree's roots will compete with your vegetables for water and nutrients in the soil. Be sure your garden is at least 75 feet from Black Walnut and Butternut trees which release a toxin in the soil that inhibits the growth of other plants.

A site with a gentle slope provides good drainage and, if the site slopes to the south, exposure to sunlight will be even greater. Avoid areas where rainwater collects after rainstorms. Poor drainage promotes disease and inhibits the growth of many plants. It's handy to locate your garden near a water source and close to the compost area. It's also nice to have vehicular access for delivering and unloading manure or leaves.

Another factor you want to consider when siting your garden is its proximity to wild animal habitats. Rabbits, deer, raccoons and other critters like freshly grown veggies just as much as you do and can consume everything in an evening if your garden is accessible. Locating the garden close to your house will help to keep the more skittish animals away.

Soil Preparation

Your soil should not be tilled or turned until it's dry enough to crumble when pressed in your hand. If you turn the soil when it's too wet, it will form large balls that later harden and remain all season. When your soil is sufficiently dry, loosen it to a depth of 6 inches and spread any fertilizer, manure, leaves or compost and work that into the soil and then rake it smooth.

It's a good idea to test the soil pH every few years. The addition of leaves, manure and other organic matter can change your soil's acidity or alkalinity. You can purchase inexpensive and easy to use pH test kits at any garden center. A complete soil analysis is a must if you're breaking new ground for a garden plot. It will tell you if your soil contains lead or other heavy metal contamination. It will also provide you with information on the soil's nutrient levels and amount of organic matter. The information provided by the soil analysis will tell you what must be added to maximize the health of your soil.

The addition of organic matter is the key to healthy soil. By adding manure, leaves, or compost, you are feeding both your soil and your plants and greatly improving the soil's ability to retain moisture and oxygen. With the addition of organic matter comes a multitude of beneficial microorganisms — some that "fix" nitrogen in the soil, making it available to plants in a readily useful form; others that manufacture antibiotics that protect plants from disease. Using pesticides in your garden eliminates these beneficial organisms leaving behind lifeless, nutrient-poor soil.

Selecting Varieties

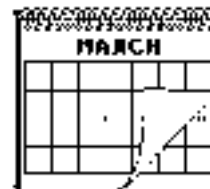
It is important to select vegetable varieties that do well in your area. Success of varieties will differ from garden to garden depending upon site conditions (like elevation and sun exposure) and gardeners' techniques. It's a good idea to keep notes each season on what varieties you plant and the flavor and yields of those varieties. These notes will help you develop a list of your favorites. It's always a big disappointment to grow two different varieties of a vegetable, have one perform poorly and taste bland and the other taste great with excellent yields and not know which is which!

It's also fun to test out a few new and interesting varieties each season. You'll find improved varieties of your favorites that may have increased yields, better flavor or disease resistance. Look for varieties that are selected for our northeastern climate and short growing season. If your garden space is limited, select "bush" varieties of squashes and use trellises and other supports for growing vining crops.

Timing

...is everything. Some crops like to mature in cool weather in the spring and fall, but others prefer the warmth of summer. Some crops are quick and don't take long to mature, others require more time than the length of our growing season and must be grown indoors for a few months before transplanting outdoors.

Frost will kill or damage some crops. The average last frost date in the Capital Region is May 20th. Our average first frost date is September 20th. Be sure to add at least two weeks to the number of "days to harvest" when determining if there's enough time left in the season to plant a particular crop. You want to have a few weeks for harvesting before the first frost hits!



You can ensure a continuous harvest of quick-growing crops like lettuce, beans, radishes, and greens by sowing small quantities of seed every couple of weeks. Some crops need to be started indoors or purchased as sets or seedlings for transplanting into the garden. Onions, leeks and the Brassicas (broccoli, kale, and cabbage) can be set out in the garden early because they can handle cold temps and even light frosts. Warm weather crops, like tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and melons need nighttime temps in the 50's before they can be planted in the garden.

When purchasing seedlings, select short, stout healthy plants that aren't yet producing flowers, buds or fruit. If you grow your own seedlings, start them indoors 6-8 weeks before transplanting outdoors. Be sure to "harden them off" two weeks before planting into the garden by gradually exposing the seedlings to the more harsh outside conditions.

Spacing, Quantities and Layout

Remember, plants grow! It's not uncommon for novice gardeners to space plants too closely causing them to compete for sunlight, moisture, nutrients and oxygen. This results in weak, straggly plants that don't provide much of a yield.

It's a good idea to keep your garden small your first few years. A small, well-tended garden will provide greater yields and satisfaction than a large, overgrown garden. Weeds may look insignificant when they first start shooting up, but they should be dealt with right away. A quick touch of the hoe to cut them down in the cooler days of May and June will save you hours of backbreaking weeding during the heat of July and August.

A thick layer of organic mulch (like straw or leaves) on top of a barrier of newspaper or brown grocery bags will keep your garden (and you) happy all season. Mulch will help to suppress weeds, retain soil moisture, and even prevent the emergence of some insect pests while keeping your garden looking neat and tidy. Be sure to wait until the soil has warmed up sufficiently before putting down mulch — mid to late June in our area.

For More Information on Capital District Community Gardens' programs
or to make a tax-deductible donation contact:



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