



VEGETABLE GARDENING BASICS
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The first step to a great vegetable garden is knowing what you want and how big a garden can you handle. You need to be realistic about the amount of time and effort you wish to devote to it. If you're new, I suggest halving the desired plot size. Add flowers for colour and to deter pests. Good choices include marigolds, nasturtiums, and gladiolas.

Vegetables require at least six hours daily exposure to sunlight so make a mental note of sunny or shady spots at various times of the day. Also, learn about prevailing winds and extreme variations in temperature. Shady areas, frost pockets, wind-swept or protected areas can actually have different hardiness levels than shown on a hardiness zone map. Peterborough is in zone 5, but micro-climate areas can be into 4 or 6 and it pays to know your own property. You will need water access and a tool storage area within easy reach of the garden.

Seeding, weeding, thinning, watering, managing pests, and harvesting require access to each plant. Rows are good but it is acceptable to arrange your vegetables in squares that allow access from all sides, as long as you can reach the middle (i.e. 2 – 4 feet wide). They can be made by mounding the soil or by constructing a frame from untreated lumber. Raised beds permit more intensive plantings and they maintain better soil quality since it is easier to avoid walking on them. Compaction makes it more difficult for plants to absorb nutrients and water. Tall plants like corn, pole beans, and tomatoes should be on the north side of the plot so as not to shade the smaller plants. Growing “up” saves space. Pole beans must have support or they will strangle themselves.

You might consider a cottage garden approach and mix your vegetables with ornamental plants. Many vegetables are very attractive and can substitute for “annuals” in your mixed borders. If space is limited, consider growing vegetables in containers, especially dwarf varieties. If you have absolutely no place to garden, then join a community garden or share with a neighbor.

Your soil must be healthy. Most plants need at least 18" (45cm.) of fertile, well-draining soil. Remove rocks, break up clods, aerate, and amend the soil with organic matter (compost or composted manure) 30 to 45 centimeters down. Vegetables are heavy feeders.

Planting instructions vary. If the seed packet offers no help, imagine the width of the grown plant and make sure the seeds or transplants are at least that distance apart. Seeds usually get planted twice the depth of the seed width. Tomato plants can be planted almost up to the first leaves. If you are using seedlings, most should be planted just after the last spring frost, usually around the May long weekend. Seeds can be planted over a much longer period. For example, green pea seeds are planted five to seven weeks before the last frost, lettuce seeds go in two to three weeks before, carrot and radish seeds can start one to two weeks before, green bean and zucchini seeds are planted just after the last frost, and cucumber seeds go in one to two weeks after.

To get your vegetables off to a good start, choose disease resistant varieties. Grow vegetables that are easy to grow and mature quickly. To reduce the possibilities of pests or diseases, practice crop rotation. Crop rotation is simply not growing the same type of plant in the same location for (usually) two years in a row.

I am sorry to say the most effective means of pest control, is hand-picking and squashing so check the garden every day. Strong smelling plants like marigolds and onions deter the bugs to some degree and if you have rabbits, a good fence is the way to go. All plants need air and room to grow. Thin plants as they grow close and keep the weeds under control.

Water early in the morning and avoid the garden when the leaves are wet. That spreads disease. Mulch maintains moisture and keeps the weeds down. But don't mulch right up to the stems, because it may encourage rot and insect infestation. Consider using soaker hoses or drip irrigation to increase your watering efficiency.

Feed the plants with compost tea, manure tea or fish emulsion. Set up a schedule and feed them regularly.

Keep a garden journal with a master plan that includes pros and cons and preferences and don't forget to keep a space for great ideas. You'll find that last year's notes, written when issues were fresh in your mind, will make plant choices much easier. Annual maps keep track of crop rotations in the vegetable garden and which plants grew well in which locations. Keep a record of planting dates for various things. All the hard work you spend now on your vegetable garden will pay off at harvest time.

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