

## Vegetable Gardening



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### **Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners**

How would you like to join me for an adventure this growing season? Let's grow some of our own food. I remember a TV programme on PBS in the 70's with its wonderful host, James Underwood Crockett. Even though Crockett's Victory Garden was produced in Boston, I followed his weekly advice and created my own productive garden. Although I cannot watch the programs anymore, I have his book and its advice is as useful now as it was a long time ago. Crockett must have grown up during the war at a time when almost everyone was growing a victory garden because they needed to. If food prices keep on rising, we may need to do it again. I enjoyed working on the vegetable gardens that I had in the past but we have gotten away from them in favour of flowers and perennials.

The way I used to grow vegetables, was a fair amount of work involving double digging, weeding and in my case, screening of rock from a patch of stony ground in Nova Scotia. I was younger and stronger then but I hope that I can compensate now by being wiser and more experienced.

Vegetable gardening does not have to involve a lot of backbreaking work because, in a small garden, you can readily use "no till" methods. These have been promoted through Mel Bartholomew's book the "All New Square Foot Gardening" and Patricia Lanza's book "Lasagna Gardening". Both are excellent reads. Long before these more recent movements, Ruth Stout promoted the use of straw mulch without any digging. To quote Ms. Stout, who grew vegetables under a deep layer of straw and never watered, fertilized, sprayed, weeded or ploughed, "I just plant and pick". There is an amazing video about Ruth Stout on Utube.

The secret is to build raised beds and once created, never dig or walk on them but to continually add decaying organic matter to the top. This is the way nature works to breakdown dead leaves and other organic matter into fertile soil that feeds the plants. Digging just disturbs the biology of the soil and brings up weed seeds. It serves very little useful purpose.

Here is how I am going to proceed this year.

My wife is a bit worried that I might commandeer some of her perennial borders to grow vegetables but she can rest easy because I have found a patch of lawn that gets a lot of sun and does not hold water after heavy rains. She does not care much for lawn; in fact it seems to be a vanishing biome on our property.

We are going to start collecting newspapers and cardboard. These will be dampened and placed directly on the grass over what will become gardens and paths. I will go to the local building store and buy 2x6 inch or 2x8 inch untreated lumber and screw them together with deck screws to create borders for the gardens which will be mostly 4 feet by 8 feet. These will be placed on top of the newspaper leaving 3 foot wide paths between them. The paths will be covered with a thick layer of mulch, probably bark chips, but it could be gravel. I will then start layering inside the beds. Never use landscape cloth which is an abomination and an affront against nature. The first layer will be unfinished compost from the bin that has held kitchen scraps through the winter. I will do this to attract my coworkers, the worms from the surrounding turf. I will then start adding layers of whatever organic matter I can find. I have a lot of leaves from last fall that I saved in our "OK Leaf Corral". They were chopped up by the lawn mower and are partly broken down. I may use some of the city's finished leaf compost that I get from Ecology Park. The trick is to use different sources and to put them in layers. I expect the layers to settle, so I will build them well above the wood. It would have been better for me to do this last fall but I still should be able to plant right away particularly if the second last layer that I put in is finished compost. The last layer will be chopped up leaves. I may add a bit of blood meal to make sure that there is enough nitrogen to get things started. I expect sometime this season, that the beds will become filled with a rich growing medium which will extend well below the original turf and all I will have to do in subsequent years is add organic matter to the top. I will never walk on the beds but should be able to reach into them, since the maximum distance from an edge will be 2 feet.

Another mistake, I made when I was younger was to chose the vegetables I grew, based on what I was interested in growing, rather than what the family would eat. Mr Crockett advised growing parsnips by taking a crowbar and pounding it deep into the soil, then creating a cone by twirling it around. The hole was filled with potting soil and the seeds planted in the top. I followed his advice and ended up with parsnips the size of small turkeys. Unfortunately, no one in the family liked parsnips. This time will be different. I will only grow what we can use.

Now is the time that broccoli and cabbage needs to be sown indoors for planting outside. You can find the timing for your favourite vegetables by reading the back of seed packages or you could visit our website in a special section we are developing [www.peterboroughgardens.ca/vegetables.html](http://www.peterboroughgardens.ca/vegetables.html)

Vegetables can be grown just about anywhere there is enough sun, even on balconies in containers. Vegetables can be both tasty and decorative, so you do not have to dedicate a specific area for them. You can place them among your other plants. I hope you join in and grow something to eat this year.

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