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A
Beginner's
Guide

to Growing Your Own Vegetables

If you like the idea of gardening but aren't sure how to start, try this step-by-step plan.

By Sandi Schwartz

Ever thought of getting back to the basics and planting your own vegetable garden?

Growing vegetables at home means enjoying fresher, more nutritious produce than what you typically find in the grocery store—and it can cut down on your grocery bill—says Carrie Spoonemore, cocreator of Park Seed's From Seed to Spoon app.

"Gardening can also be therapeutic, offering a fulfilling way to spend time outdoors and reconnect with nature," says Spoonemore. Plus, you can avoid harmful chemicals because you have control over how the veggies are grown.

Starting a garden from scratch may feel like a daunting task, so we have broken it down into manageable steps for you to follow. With the right preparation, tools, and knowledge, you and your family can create a beautiful, thriving vegetable garden so you'll have fresh produce at your fingertips.



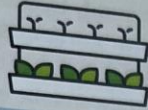
In-ground



Container



Raised beds



Vertical

Choose a garden type.

The first step is to decide what type of garden you want. It should match your space, goals, available time, budget, and experience level, advises Spoonemore.

“In-ground gardens work well if you have a large yard,” she says, “while container gardens are ideal for patios or balconies, offering flexibility to move plants.” Most vegetables—such as tomatoes, lettuce, potatoes, and peppers—do well in containers.

“Raised beds are great for areas with poor soil,” Spoonemore says. They are also a great option for people who have mobility issues or have a hard time standing or kneeling.

Finally, vertical gardens save space and provide visual appeal using trellised support for vines and fruit, such as peas, beans, and cucumbers.

Pick a location.

When choosing a spot for your vegetable garden, keep the following considerations in mind to ensure your garden is successful:



SUN Most vegetables need 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight daily, although some can handle shade.

Check plant tags for sun and shade needs.



WATER Spoonemore recommends a location with easy access to a rain barrel or hose.

“Keep in mind the best time to water is in the early morning so plants can soak up water before the heat of the afternoon,” she says.



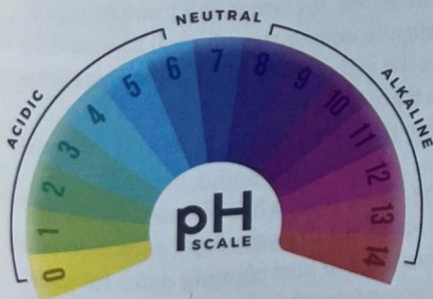
DRAINAGE Choose an area with well-draining soil where the water doesn't pool.



SPACE Make sure there's plenty of space for the plants you want to grow. If you have limited space, consider using containers or raised beds.

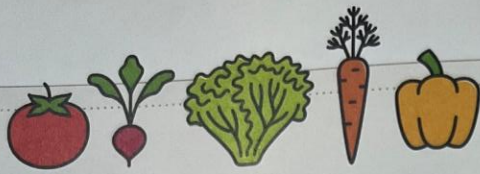


WIND Avoid places that receive strong winds that could knock over plants.



Test and amend the soil.

It's important to test and prepare your soil. You'll need nutrient-rich soil for your vegetable plants to thrive. You can test it yourself with a soil test kit, hire a professional, or contact your local cooperative extension office to assist you. The results, such as the nitrogen and pH levels, will let you know if you need to amend the soil (i.e., make adjustments to the soil) to create an optimal growing environment for your plants.



Determine the best vegetables to plant.

Once you know the soil is fertile, you can pick out the specific vegetables to plant.

Purchase your seeds or starter plants from a reputable nursery to make sure they are right for your climate, soil, and sunlight. Refer to the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map for guidance (planthardiness.ars.usda.gov). Choose plants at the store that look strong, green, and lush with solid leaves and stems that aren't too droopy.

"Select varieties your household loves to eat," says Spoonemore. It's also beneficial to consider how much space you have in the garden, how many vegetables your kitchen can handle, what's available in your local grocery store, and how much time you are willing to put into caring for the garden throughout the year.

"New gardeners might start with easy-to-grow vegetables like lettuce, radishes, or herbs," suggests Spoonemore. Other popular choices for beginners include cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, and carrots.



Plan out your garden.

Before you start digging holes in the ground, take some time to plan out your garden. A carefully planned vegetable garden will allow you to work with nature and the ecosystem of your yard.

"An efficient plan is needed to get the most out of your garden and to know what the best uses of your crop will be," says Spoonemore.

Consider row length, row orientation, spacing between rows, and planting dates. Plot out exactly where you will plant each type of vegetable, and be sure to leave walkways to easily access all parts of the garden. Design rows to be no more than four feet wide so you can reach everything. Also, jot down the timing of when each plant will be planted if you are growing ones that are time-sensitive.

For extra precision, you can draw a map to scale using graph paper or use one of the many online garden planning tools or apps.

Get your tools—and start planting.

Now that you have a plan, it's time to get your hands dirty!

You'll need these tools:



Some plants do better when seeds are placed directly into the garden, while others are best started in a container and transplanted. Check online or ask for guidance at your local garden store.

Follow the instructions on the seed packets or plant tags to determine the planting depth and spacing requirements recommended to avoid overcrowding. Loosen the soil using a rototiller or by hand to help new roots access the water and nutrients they need to grow. Plant them slightly deeper than the soil line on their container and loosely press the soil around them. If the roots have grown into a ball, untangle them before placing the plant into the hole. Finally, pat the soil into place around the roots and then soak it with water.

When it comes to timing, every region has different guidelines based on climate. Refer to resources like your local extension office or the Old Farmer's Almanac's list of best planting dates for your region (almanac.com/gardening/planting-calendar).

Properly care for your garden.

Consistent care is essential for a thriving vegetable garden.

While it can seem overwhelming when starting out, there are lots of resources to refer to for help, from books and articles to online classes and YouTube videos.

Spoonemore has a few basic tips:



Water deeply and regularly, especially during dry spells, to keep the soil moist but not waterlogged.



Mulch around plants to help retain moisture, suppress weeds, and regulate soil temperature.



Regularly check plants for pests or diseases, addressing issues early to prevent spread and to maintain plant health.



Fertilize plants to keep them healthy, using safe organic fertilizer or compost.



Prune plants. Remove dead, dying, and diseased vegetation right away. And pull weeds before they go to seed.



Enjoy the harvest.

You've made it to the best part, and now you can enjoy all your hard work. Harvest vegetables at their peak for the best flavor and nutrient content, says Spoonemore. "Check recommended harvest times for each type," she advises. Some vegetables, such as tomatoes and cucumbers, should be picked when they are fully ripe, while others, such as lettuce and herbs, can be harvested continuously.

Finally, proper storage helps extend freshness and flavor, allowing you to enjoy your harvest longer, says Spoonemore. Potatoes and onions, for example, do best in cool, dark places, while leafy greens should be refrigerated. **vi**

Sandi Schwartz is an award-winning author and freelance journalist who has written extensively about gardening, nature, and wellness.