

Create A Vegetable Garden The Easy Way

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So this was the year you were finally going to start a vegetable garden. But then came the spring rains, the kids' soccer games, the brutally hot summer, and the trip to visit Mom. As a result, you still don't have that garden. Don't despair! The best time to create a vegetable garden is not in spring; it is actually in fall.

But how do you begin? There is no one right way to do it. In fact, in my family, we often joke, "Get 10 gardeners together, and you are likely to get 12 opinions." Even the most experienced gardeners have differing ideas on the topic.



Photo Colorado State University
Cooperative Extension

In addition, gardening theories change over time. Years ago, people believed that you had to "double dig"; that is, dig down twice the depth of a shovel to loosen the soil and turn it over. Ouch! You can still find that method in vintage garden books, but it is labor intensive, not very practical, and hard on gardeners' backs. People next advocated tilling—turning over soil with a garden tiller and adding amendments. Now, many gardeners are ditching tilling in favor of using raised beds and layering. (For the pros and cons of tilling, These latter two techniques save the gardener a lot of work.

Starting a garden the easy way takes just four steps

- Deciding on a site
- Killing existing vegetation
- Setting up a planter box or outlining where to mound soil
- Building and adding soil

Follow these four steps, and you'll be well on your way to planting veggies next year. However, if your neighbor insists that you must till or add a certain type of fertilizer, feel free to tweak this method. It's important that you do what is easy and works for you.

Decide on a site

You may already be thinking about where to locate your garden. Make sure that it gets full sun at least six hours a day; eight to 10 hours is even better. While there are certain vegetables (including lettuce, spinach and kale) that will grow with less sun, produce such as tomatoes, peppers, squash and eggplants need a full day's exposure.

Both beginning and experienced gardeners often underestimate the time and energy required to tend a garden. While growing vegetables is probably easier than most people think, you will need to dedicate adequate time and muscle to plant, weed regularly, monitor diseases and insects, and water everything properly. A 4-by-4 foot plot is a good starter-size for a beginning gardener and will allow you to grow a variety of vegetables throughout most of the season. If you find that you want to do more, it will be easy enough to create additional small plots in increments.

Kill existing vegetation

Mow your designated garden spot as closely as possible. If you like, you can add some all-purpose fertilizer to the ground, watering it well to encourage dormant greenery to sprout. (This will die later when

you cover it with a mulch.) This process adds some nutrients to the soil, but it is optional. Even without it, you will be building a rich soil for your raised bed.

Cover the spot with a layer of cardboard from old boxes or with newspaper that is at least eight layers thick. This material will decompose over the winter as your garden settles in. If you opt for cardboard, be sure to remove any staples or plastic tape. If you use newspapers, choose only the black-and-white sections, which contain soy-based inks that are garden-safe. Colored or glossy sections contain inks and chemicals that are not beneficial.

Consider covering an area that is a bit larger than the area you plan to plant so that you have a border around it. You can have grass growing right next to the planting area; however, the grass or weeds that grow in the grass may spread into the planting area or under the perimeter of the planting box and into your vegetable bed and may be difficult to remove. If you have a 1-to-2 foot border around the box, you can mulch it, making your garden neater and easier to maintain. For example, then, if you want your planting space to be 4 feet by 4 feet, lay the cardboard or newspaper in a 5-by-5 or 6-by-6 square to allow for the border, too.

Set up a planter box or outline where to mound the soil

Many gardeners believe raised beds work best. The soil will drain easily and using the correct materials will result in a looser soil that is easier to dig and weed. You can build a raised bed by simply mounding soil, but you will have a neater garden if you build or buy a box to create the raised bed. Additionally, heavy rains such as those we experienced this summer may wash away some of the mounded soil since it is uncontained. Big-box stores sell 4-by-4 foot boxes made of cedar, which are easy to assemble and do not rot, for under \$40. If you want to build your own, be sure to use wood that will not decay quickly. Good choices besides cedar include redwood and black locust, although these cost more. You can also use decking material made out of recycled plastic. It is inexpensive and will last a long time. Another budget-friendly option is cinder blocks. Some gardeners use pressure-treated wood as a cost-conscious option. In the past, this contained arsenic (that could leach into the soil and reach your plants) and the EPA eventually banned the sale of such wood. Manufacturers now use copper in place of arsenic but scientists still have differing opinions about the long-term outcomes of using copper-treated wood in the garden. Therefore, if you want to consider using pressure-treated wood, take some time to research the topic so you can make an informed decision. Note that the Department of Agriculture does not allow the use of pressure treated woods with soils used to grow organic food.

When you have assembled your planting box, place it over the cardboard or newspaper that you have used as mulch.

Build and add soil

This is the most important step in starting a garden because the soil supplies what plants need to do well. Unfortunately, soil in our area contains a large amount of clay, resulting in heavy dirt that does not drain well. It is very acidic and vegetables will not thrive in it, so you will most likely need to amend it generously. Rather than guessing what your soil might need, get it tested and add any recommended amendments (for more about soil testing, see "The Scoop On Dirt").

Alternatively, you can create your own growing medium. A popular formula mixes compost, coir, and vermiculite or perlite in equal parts (by volume, not weight). Healthy soil that will support vigorous plant growth is alive with microorganisms. Compost contributes these microorganisms to your soil, as well as nutrients such as phosphorous, potassium and magnesium. Vermiculite or perlite, which are mined from the earth, supply minerals, help retain moisture, and keep the soil light or "friable". Coir, which is made from coconut husks, also holds water and makes soil friable. Combine the ingredients, wet them well, and you will have a perfect medium in which to start your plants.

Fill your raised bed, or create a mound where you plan to plant, and you are done. Let the site rest over the winter so the organic matter has a chance to blend in, and you will be ready to plant in the spring. Time to get growing!