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March 18, 2009

Home Vegetable Gardening's Popularity Growing

Home vegetable gardening is a popular hobby for a number of reasons. Some people garden for exercise and some for the enjoyment of harvesting flavorful produce that can be eaten fresh from the garden or preserved for use during winter. Others garden so they can grow a wider variety of vegetables than are available at their local grocery store. Finally, in recent years many people are growing vegetables to save money on their grocery bill.

Regardless of motive, gardening can be as simple or as complex a project as you make it. However, careful planning can make gardening easier, more productive, and more enjoyable. In planning your garden, it is important to consider a few basics.

"How big should my garden be?"

This is an important consideration because a small, weed-free garden will produce more than a larger, poorly maintained garden. Consider how many family members will really help with the garden, or will you handle the hoe alone? Plants such as watermelon, pumpkin and winter squash take up large quantities of garden space. In small gardens the use of compact vegetable cultivars will conserve space and enable gardeners to still plant a greater variety of vegetables.



Some vegetables can even be grown in containers, allowing placement near the kitchen door and providing growing room for those without enough space for a vegetable garden. Vegetables and herbs can also be incorporated in ornamental plantings of shrubs, perennials and annuals to create an edible landscape.

"What should I plant?"

Consider growing the vegetables your family enjoys eating since it makes no sense to plant vegetables that no one likes. Tomatoes, both slicing and cherry types, are among the most popular home garden vegetables. Carrots, radishes, beans, peas and salad greens (lettuce, arugula, mesclun, sorrel) are some of the easiest vegetables to grow. Vegetable cultivars with unusual color or shape, like 'Purple Haze' carrots or 'Easter Egg' radishes, make gardening, and possibly even eating, vegetables fun for children.

"How many plants does my family need?"

This depends on your family's personal preferences and whether vegetables will be eaten fresh or preserved for winter use. Below are some approximate yield guidelines for a few home garden vegetables:

Cabbage and cauliflower yield one head per plant

Potatoes yield 2 to 4 pounds. of tubers per plant

Tomatoes yield 10 pounds of fruit per plant
Sweet corn yields 2 ears per plant
Watermelon plants yield 2-3 fruits per plant
Zucchini yields 1-2 fruits per plant per week

Locate your garden in a level area with well-drained soil and a minimum of six hours direct sunlight each day, although 8-10 hours of direct sunlight are ideal. Avoid low spots or areas at the base of a slope or hill. Such areas are slow to warm up in spring and may collect water. Make sure your garden has easy access to water and is close enough to your home for easy maintenance and harvesting. You may also grow plants in more than one location of your yard. A small garden near the kitchen door can provide herbs and greens for quick seasoning and salads.

Draw your garden plan on paper before planting to make the best use of all garden space.

Place tall or trellised crops on the north side of the garden to prevent shading shorter vegetables. However, if your garden is exposed to strong southern summer winds, corn, asparagus and other tall plants can provide wind protection for shorter plants if planted on the south or west side of the garden.

Group plants by length of growing period. Plant spring crops together so that later crops can be planted in these areas as the early crops are harvested.

Place perennial crops, such as asparagus and rhubarb, to one side of the garden where they will not be disturbed by tilling.

For a list of some vegetable cultivars suitable for use throughout Nebraska, refer to [Selected Vegetable Cultivars for Nebraska](http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1896.pdf) (<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/sendIt/g1896.pdf>). The complete list of University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension publications is available [here](http://ianrpubs.unl.edu) (<http://ianrpubs.unl.edu>). Click on 'Lawn && Garden', then scroll down to 'Vegetables'.

Thumbing through seed catalogues and dreaming of the season's harvest is a great way to make late winter pass more quickly. Seed purchased from a reputable seed company will provide a good start toward realizing your vision of bounty from the vegetable garden.

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