

Starting a vegetable garden



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Question: I just moved to a new neighborhood and wish to start a vegetable garden, but I'm not sure where to put it. Do you have any pointers when choosing a site to put my garden?

Answer: This is a crucial question when first starting out on planning a vegetable garden. Location is one of the most important things to consider and can be the factor that leads to either a successful, high-yielding garden or a dismal failure.

The first thing to consider is how much sunlight does the site get during the day. Vegetable plants need at least six to eight hours of full sunlight to thrive, otherwise they will become weak and spindly. Avoid shady sites near buildings, trees or shrubs. Observe how the sun moves throughout the day (though we know the sun doesn't move) – does it go behind a tall tree in the afternoon, making for more shade? Remember during the fall, winter and spring, the sun is lower in the sky, and take that into consideration as well. If the best garden site is in a shaded area, then consider sticking with more shade-tolerant crops like lettuce, herbs, Swiss chard and spinach. An open, south-facing, gradual slope is ideal.

The soil is extremely important as well. Vegetables need a well-drained, fertile soil. Does your site puddle with water when the rains come? Is it heavy clay? A water logged soil is anaerobic (oxygen deficient), which results in suffocated roots. Roots won't develop without a constant supply of oxygen found in the soil. Also poorly drained soil



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Vegetable gardens should be large enough to feed your family, but not so large that they become a burden.



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Growing squash in a livestock bin is a way to save space when starting a vegetable garden.

remains wet and cold late into the spring, making it difficult to grow early season vegetables like peas and carrots. The solution is to incorporate organic matter such as compost or composted animal manure into your garden, ideally 6 weeks before planting. The site should also be fairly level to avoid erosion during heavy rains, but if a slope is the only choice you have, then run rows of vegetables across the slope in contoured

terraces.

Vegetables need a soil pH between the range of 5.5 and 7.0, otherwise they won't get enough nutrients no matter how much organic matter you use. A good idea is to have your soil tested to see what is the pH and what other nutrients it might have or lack. Another way to gauge the fertility of your soil is to observe its natural vegetation – the healthier the weeds or grass that are growing on the site, the



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Hand holding fertile soil.

better the soil would be for vegetables.

Air movement is really important for your garden as well. Stagnant, humid, warm air can create ideal conditions for foliage diseases. Look for a site that has a natural breeze flow, but not windy.

Another very important consideration is convenience. Place your garden where it will be easy to care for – near to the house as possible and close to a water source. If you have to walk 500 yards to your garden site each time you have to work in it, or drag a heavy, 50-foot hose to

water it each time, you will probably give up on the whole project. Consider how easy or difficult it will be to set up an irrigation system. Ideally, the garden can be located near your kitchen, to easily harvest fresh vegetables right to the dinner table. How big do you need your garden to be? Garden size depends on the kinds and amounts of vegetables, how much land is available and the amount of time you have to manage the garden. It should be large enough to supply your family's needs, but not so large it becomes a burden.

You must also consider

Gardening should be fun and satisfying, providing you and your family with healthy, homegrown vegetables.

how you will protect your vegetables from those four-footed marauders – deer. Installing 6-8 foot fencing is really the only way to keep Bambi out of your garden, so if deer are a common visitor to your neighborhood, this can be a big expense.

If space is limited, there are many alternatives to planting a vegetable garden in the ground. With proper care, edibles can be included in your landscape among ornamental plants. You can squeeze quite a few vegetables in large pots or wine barrels cut in half. I've seen very successful gardens planted in steel livestock water troughs and even straw bales. And of course, building raised beds is a very efficient and easy way to garden since you can control the soil conditions and keep gardening chores to a minimum.

Gardening should be fun and satisfying, providing you and your family with healthy, homegrown vegetables. Take advantage of all the available tools to learn more about it. Contact OSU Extension Master Gardeners and find out all about the many classes and resources we make available to the public.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.