

How To Start A Vegetable Garden

With this step-by-step article, it's fun and easy!

Over the last few months a lot of people have written in asking how to start a vegetable garden, and what I personally do when beginning to plan, organize, and plant my garden.

Considering all the variables that can go into growing vegetables, these were questions that needed more space to expand upon than there was room for in the Question & Answer Section.

So in order to better answer how I start a vegetable garden, I decided to share with you exactly how my family and I plan, organize, and plant our garden, and you can follow along, step-by-step in this article.

Now I am going to assume you have already chosen your vegetable seeds. If you're not sure about buying seeds, see article - [Tips to Get the Most Out of Mail Order Seed and Plant Catalogs](#) - about how to choose and buy seeds from a catalog. The information in that article also applies to buying seed at your local garden center.



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From seed, I typically like to plant: corn, beets, radishes, parsnips, squash, potatoes, beans, peas, flowers, pumpkins, carrots, sunflowers, chard, and onion (sets).

As far as buying **young plants**, I like to buy tomatoes, melons, cucumbers, peppers, some lettuce, and herbs.



After talking it over, my family and I decided to keep our garden fairly simple this year by not planting as many different types of vegetables as we usually do, but still using good planting techniques to conserve water and weeding.

If, however, you want to plant more than we have in our garden this year, go for it; this article is just to get you started. Also, if you live in an area that is cooler than ours, and you actually need more warmth in the soil, don't worry, I mention that alternative as we go along.

Vegetable gardens are fun, and with a little prep, very easy. Even if you have never planted a vegetable garden before, you can get started right away, and be very successful.

So let's get going - daylight's burning!

How Large an Area

This really is determined by how much space you have, and how many vegetables you want to grow. This year my family and I are making a much smaller garden, but still using similar layout and planting techniques to get more produce from less space, using less water.

We are using a 20 ft x 20 ft (6 m x 6 m) area. You can see how we covered the area with a heavy black plastic cloth.

This is because last fall, we decided not to have a winter garden, and so we covered the area with thick black plastic cloth to solarize the soil, and keep the weeds out. No reason not to do this. I mean, why let the weeds take over a nicely tilled area?

After pulling off the cloth, the first thing we did was a quick soil test for pH. Our test showed a pH of close to 6.5, which is ideal. This is good news because we didn't need to add any lime or sulfur to adjust the pH.

You will want to test your soil, and you can use a simple soil-test kit from the garden center to do this. Just follow the instructions on the kit and you will get your soil pH close enough to successfully grow healthy vegetables.

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Add Organic Matter and Till

Now thanks to our black plastic we have no weeds, and our soil test showed we didn't have to add any amendments to adjust soil pH, but that doesn't mean we don't want to add some good organic matter to the soil.

Organic matter breaks down over time and needs to be replaced, so we want to replace it in the spring and fall with a good layer of compost.

We put down about 2-3 inches (5-8 cm) of good, rich compost across the top of our plot of soil, which ended up being about 1-1/2 yards of compost.

Next we tilled in the compost thoroughly in two directions. Now, if your soil test said you needed to add amendments to adjust soil pH, you would have spread those amendments over the soil, with the compost, and tilled them all in together at the same time.

We tilled north-south and then east-west to make sure the compost was well worked in, and the soil had a nice texture. Keep in mind, you only want to till soil when its moisture content is just right, or you can ruin your soil structure.

To see examples of good moisture content before tilling to preserve soil structure you can

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read this tip - [Care For Your Soil Structure](#)

Make Your Plan

With the tilling done, now we are ready to start laying out our garden. I drew up a garden map on paper so we had a reference to use when out in the field. We set up our garden facing north with our tallest crops, which are sunflowers and corn, in the northern most area so they won't cast any shade on the shorter crops.

If you notice from our paper plan, we have three different kinds of rows:

1. Wide Row Planting

Our wide rows are 3 ft (.91 m) wide x 5 ft (1.5 m) long. They can also be blocks as big as 10 ft x 10 ft (3 m x 3 m). It's up to you. Wide rows are good because crops such as peas and beans don't need staking. The vines grow up in a cluster and they support themselves.

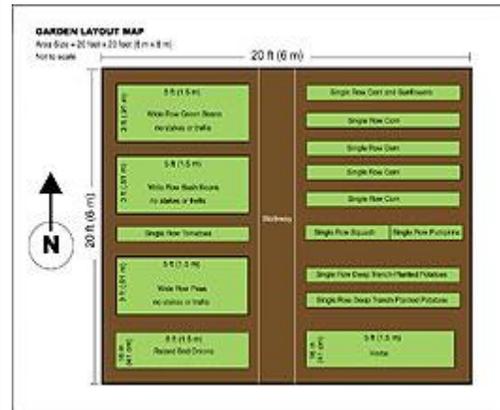
Also you don't have to water, weed or cultivate as much, because the plants grow up and shade the soil crowding weeds out and preserving moisture.

If you have never tried this because you always plant in long skinny rows, try planting with wide rows; you'll really like it. We plant all vegetables in wide rows except the ones listed under Single Row Planting.

Other benefits of wide row planting:

- Grow 2 to 3 times the vegetables that you would grow in regular single rows
- Grow more in less space
- Crowds the weeds out

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- Plants create their own living mulch, keeping soil cool and moist, conserving water by slowing the moisture-evaporation rate which is good if you live in a very warm climate.

Now if you live in a **cooler climate**, do the **reverse**. Plant higher and warmer, **use raised beds** as mentioned next.

2. Raised Beds

Our raised beds are 16 inches (41 cm) wide x 5 ft (1.5 m) long, and are best used for **ALL root crops** such as onions, carrots, beets, rutabagas, turnips, parsnips and radishes. Your carrots will be straight and juicy, and crops such as beets, turnips and onions have twice as much loose soil to expand in as beds that were made level with the ground, so the bulbs get larger.

Raised beds are also good for heat-loving vegetables like tomatoes and peppers, so if you live in a cooler climate with a short growing season, use elevated raised beds because they stay warmer and drier because they are surrounded by air and sun on three sides.

Raised beds are also good if you tend to have heavy soils that don't drain well, because raised beds stay 8 to 10 degrees warmer than soil at ground level, and they drain, and dry out faster too. This is good because then you can plant crops such as peas, onions and salad greens earlier in the season and not have to wait for cool, clammy soil to warm up.

Raised beds also help plants get more oxygen which help plant roots and soil organisms.

Now if you live in **hot climate**, do the **reverse**. Plant lower, and cooler, and **use the wide row planting** as mentioned above.

3. Single Row Planting



This is the conventional way to plant and it still has its value for some crops. The only vegetables we plant in single rows are corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and sprawling vine like squashes, melons, and cucumbers.

If you are short on space, many vine crops can be grown **vertically**. If you have never done this, please read the tip from our Garden Idea Blog that shows you how: [To Grow Squash, Melons and Cucumbers Vertically](#)

OK - so we have our plan, and our planting techniques, let's start planting!

Layout and Fertilize

First we draw out our map in the soil. If you want, you can use stakes and strings and lay out your rows. We tend to eyeball it and it always comes out just fine. The only area we do string off is the main walkway down the middle.

Once our areas are drawn out, we put down a light sprinkling of fertilizer over all the planting areas. We use an organic 5-5-5 complete fertilizer that is a granular form.

Once the fertilizer is down, we lightly rake it in. We don't want the seeds we are going to plant to come into direct contact with the fertilizer; it could burn them. We just want to provide some basic food so when the seeds start to grow they have nutrients available to them.

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Wide Row Planting of Beans and Peas

We are going to start planting our wide row of green beans. We have two kinds of beans this year, but we are going to plant them the same

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way.

Notice even for our regular green beans, that can grow up to 5 to 6 ft (1.5 - 2 m) tall, we will not be staking them. As they grow, they will support themselves!

Sprinkle the seed evenly so they are about 2 to 3 inches (5 to 8 cm) apart from each other.

Cover with about 1 inch (2.5 cm) of soil and tamp down lightly with your rake. You want to make sure there is good contact between the soil and the seeds so there are no air pockets and the seeds will stay nice and moist.

We will follow the exact same steps for our wide row of peas.

For more, use our in-depth Growing Guides:

[Growing Dried Beans](#)

[Growing Fresh Beans](#)

[Growing Peas](#)



Single Row Planting of Tomatoes

Next we are going to plant our tomatoes. This is one of the crops we still plant using single rows, but we will plant our tomatoes on their sides.

Dig out a shallow trench. Remove the lower stems and branches off the tomatoes, leaving only the upper most top leaves.

Lay the entire plant down a trench on its side and cover with soil. Leave only the top leaves showing. Don't worry if the foliage is pointing to the side, it will right itself and grow upright in a few days.

We plant tomatoes on their sides because the

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entire stem that is now buried will form roots, giving our plant the best foundation possible and allowing the plant a greater ability to absorb nutrients and water. Plus a larger root system near the soil surface will mean that more heat will be available to the plant, producing earlier tomatoes.

A word about cutworms. If you have a big problem with cutworms in your area, you will want to place a "cutworm collar" around the stem where it goes into the soil. You can use a strip of newspaper or an old cardboard toilet paper roll holder.

Cutworms chew along the surface and a thin strip of newspaper or cardboard around the plant stem will stop cutworms from chewing through the stem. Firm the soil down evenly. We'll be watering everything in a few minutes, but we have more planting to do.

For more, use our in-depth Growing Guides:

[Growing Tomatoes](#)

[Growing Tomatoes & Tomato Growing Tips](#)



Single Row of Potatoes

Now we are going to plant our potatoes. First dig a furrow that is about 4 to 6 inches (10 - 15 cm) deep. We do this because new potatoes form in the soil **ABOVE** the seed potato so we want to give them plenty of room to get started. We will be "hilling" our potatoes as they grow, but more on that in a minute.

First we are going to lay down some organic 3-15-2 fertilizer in the trench. The three numbers on a fertilizer label represent N-P-K (nitrogen - phosphorous - and potassium) The middle number 15 represents the amount of

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phosphorous and phosphorus is used by plants for root growth.

So choose a good fertilizer that is high in phosphorous any time you are planting root crops like potatoes, onions or carrots because it will help form a healthier crop. Remember, we already added some balance fertilizer over the entire planting area, so this phosphorous-rich fertilizer is an addition to it.

Next cover the high phosphorous fertilizer with some soil, we don't want the seed potatoes to be sitting on the fertilizer, it will burn them.

Then take your seed potatoes and cover them in sulfur (You can buy soil sulfur at any garden center). Put some sulfur in a paper bag, and put in your seed potatoes and gently shake. Your potatoes will now have a light coating of sulfur.

We do this for a couple of reasons: sulfur helps prevent rotting, and it also makes the soil around the potato seed a bit more acid, which potatoes like. In fact potatoes like a pH of around 5.0 so a little sulfur is a good thing.

Now we are ready to plant. Put your seed potatoes in the trench with the eye, or sprouted buds, facing upwards.

Then cover with 4 to 5 inches (10 - 12 cm) of soil and tamp down lightly. That's it. We'll water in just a few minutes. Now in a few weeks, new growth will start to push up through the soil. When that happens, you need to start hilling.

Hilling

Remember, new potatoes form ABOVE the planted seed potato, that's why we planted in a trench, and left about 3 feet (.91 m) on either side of our trenches so we would have plenty of soil to pull up and over the plants. When



new growth starts appearing we are going to cover it up.

Start hilling potatoes when the plants are a few inches tall. Cover the plant completely with soil; don't leave any part of the plant showing. The plant will keep right on growing and soon it will grow through the mounded soil on top of it. Do this twice. Right before the second hilling, put down some more high phosphorus fertilizer and then do your second hilling, and don't be stingy on how much soil you mound up over the plants, because the more loose soil is on top of the seed potato, the more new potatoes will form.

After the second hilling, water and care for the plants until the foliage starts to fade and the leaves turn brown, which won't be until the early fall. When that happens, it's time to harvest.





Single Row Planting of Squashes, Pumpkins, Corn

This is super easy. Simply dig a trench, and drop your seeds in. We already put down our complete fertilizer and worked that in, so just cover the seeds and lightly tamp down.

Now for the corn, you will want to hill and side dress, but I'll be getting into those details in next month's article. For now just water and let grow.

For more, use our in-depth Growing Guides:

[Growing Pumpkins](#)

[Growing Summer Squash](#)

[Growing Winter Squash](#)

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[Growing Sweet Corn](#)



Raised Bed for Onions and Root Crops

We make our raised beds about 16 inches (cm) wide, but you can make them up to 24 inches (cm) wide if you want. It's really up to you. As we mentioned earlier, we grow all our root crops in raised beds because the extra loose soil allows for superior root formation.

Go down one side of the bed and pull up loose soil into the middle portion of the row. Then switch sides so now you are standing in the area where you took the soil, and pull more soil up and into the middle part of the row. Form the seed bed by lightly dragging your rake down the center forming a flat surface on top of the mound. The raised bed is now about 8 to 9 inches (cm) tall and ready to plant.

Before you plant, however, in addition to the complete fertilizer we put down earlier, we are going to put down some high phosphorous fertilizer like a 3-15-2 for good root

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development. Lightly sprinkle it over your raised bed and work it in. Plant your onion sets so that just the tip of the onion is poking up through the soil.

For more, use our in-depth Growing Guides:

[Growing Beets](#)

[Growing Carrots](#)



Wide Row Plant Herbs and Flowers

In your 3 ft x 5 ft (.91 x 1.5 m) area plant whatever herbs and flowers you would like to have.

This is your free-for-all area to put in whatever you want. Perhaps you want to try something new. This is a great area to do it.

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Finishing Up

Snail and Earwig Bait

We put down a light sprinkling of snail and earwig bait to keep the critters from chewing our nice new plants to pieces.

Hose Guides

We always drive a few stakes into each corner of our garden so when we are pulling the hose to water, the stakes guide it around the plants so it won't drag across our garden. It's up to you if you want to take this step.

Water In

Our final step! Water everything in thoroughly

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and keep the seed areas moist until they germinate and start growing. Once that happens you can then start allowing them to dry out a bit between waterings as you usually would do with growing plants.

Conclusion

You made it!

As you can see from the steps above, starting a vegetable garden isn't hard and it's a lot fun, especially when everything starts growing, and you start harvesting and eating your produce.



Just follow the steps we went over today, and you'll be just fine. Next month we'll follow the garden along and get more into hilling our potatoes and corn and other maintenance tips.

So go get started and I'll see you next month!