

How to Open Your Garden Plot – Easy Steps and Tips for Starting your Vegetable and Fruit Garden

Step 1: Where to plant your crops

Keep these tips in mind when planning your garden plot:

- **Easy-to-reach:** A place that is easy for you to harvest your garden will make it easier for you. Make sure you can get a wheelbarrow into the garden or can easily carry buckets of manure or compost to the soil beds.
- **A sunny spot:** Most vegetables need full sun. Some vegetables and fruit prefer semi-shade and can be placed in a less than ideal location. Ask at your local garden centre or read the seed packets to determine where to plan certain seeds or plants.
- **Open and sheltered site:** The plot should be located in an area that is easily accessible by bees and other pollinating insects so they can easily carry pollen from plant to plant.
- **A flat site:** While a flat site is the best in terms of keeping the water in your garden and lowering the risk of erosion of the soil beds, you can plant into a sloped area. Plant across the slope and make flat terraces.

Step 2: Prepare your soil

Proper soil is the key to good plants:

- **Tools:** Make sure you have access to different garden tools such as a shovel, cultivator, trowel, and kneeler. A hoe is a good tool for weeding. Use tools that are comfortable for you. Try them out at the garden centre before purchasing them. See if your neighbour has one you can borrow.
- **Do not over-dig:** It is better to not disturb the soil too much when preparing it for your garden. There is no need to dig and dig. Just dig the soil that you need to level for the planting bed. Try not to dig in very wet soil, especially if the soil contains a lot of clay. Wait until the sun dries the soil up a bit.
- **Plan your garden:** Create rows in 18" squares by making little hills in the soil (6 – 8" high) and flattening the hills on top. Trenches between rows are helpful in early spring crops.

- Weeding: Weeds grow very easily. Keep weeds under control by removing them throughout the entire gardening season. Don't forget to do some weeding a few times in May before you plant your seeds or plants.

Step 3: What should you plant?

- Tomatoes: Tomato plants are easy to grow and have many different varieties available in your local garden centre.
- Plant your favourite foods: Plant what you enjoy to eat. Share your produce with family and friends. If you still have lots left over, donate the produce to your local food bank or meal program.
- Crop-weather matching: Plant items that are suitable for the local weather conditions. Ask an expert at your local garden expert to help you pick the correct plants for your local weather.
- Difficult crops:
 - Peas taste delicious but it takes many pea plants to create a full harvest.
 - Corn and pumpkins are popular – but unfortunately more tempting for vandalism. If you don't mind losing some of your produce to vandalism, then go ahead and plant these but gardener beware!
 - Melons are a favourite but they take 100 days to grow and we have only about 150 frost free days for our growing season.
 - Peppers are nutritious and come in many varieties. They do better when overnight temperatures are above 55°F / 13°C.
- Seeds vs Plants: The larger the seed, the easier it is to plant directly into the garden plot. If you can start your own seedlings early or purchase a bit larger plant, you may be ahead of the game. Seedlings require a bit more nursery time compared to larger plants. Determine what is best for your garden.
- Herbs and Flowers: These can be very pretty but also very practical. Many are useful at helping to manage pests in the garden.
- Cooler weather at night: In the early days of spring, it can get quite cool at night. Find out if the plants you purchased from the garden centre have been left outside without protection. If they have, they may do very well in the garden at night. If they were protected, they may still be sensitive to sun and cold. You may need to protect them at night.

Step 4: Planning your Plot

- **When to start:** In general, it is wise to wait until the end of May to start planting. Usually around the Victoria Day weekend in May is a good rule of thumb to use.
- **Easy to reach:** Plan and create rows that are easy for you to get around in the garden. Two feet between rows is generally a good distance.
- **Modified square foot gardening plan:** One way to maximize your production is to use square foot gardening. This type of gardening arranges your garden in squares, not rows. It is a simple system that adapts to all levels of experience, physical abilities, and geographic locations. Grow all you want and need in only 20% of the space of a conventional row garden and in the process, save time, water, work and money. (www.squarefootgardening.org)
- **Arrange your plants:** Arrange your plants according to their maximum height and width of each plant. The seed packets will tell you this information or you can ask an expert at your local garden centre for advice. In general, place tall crops at the north end of your garden so they don't cast a shadow on shorter plants.
- **Plant on a cloudy day:** Too much hot sun when planting may be hard on your plants. Plant when it is cooler weather and water your newly planted garden well. Hand watering is one of the best ways to practice water conservation because the water reaches just each plant, not the rows and paths between plants.
- **Weeding:** Overplanting may help reduce the weed growth in your garden. Keep up with the weeds by removing them frequently. If you don't weed frequently, your plants will be shaded by the weeds and will compete with them for space and water.
- **Provide support for your plants:** Poles and twigs are the easy way to support climbing plants. Bamboo poles and twine are inexpensive and ideal for some structures. You can also purchase plant "cages" at your local garden centre that help support plants that grow up as much as they grow wide.

Step 5: Pest Management

Here is a summary of what organic garden pest control mixtures consist of and how they work:

- Smell: Garlic, rhubarb, fish and other strong smelling substances can be used to repel pests.
- Gases and odour molecules: Many plants give off natural odors or have smelly oils that some bugs find unpleasant. Often these odors or oils are a warning to bugs that the plant contains its own built in insecticide. You can make concoctions from these plants to keep pests away from your plants.
- Heat or fumes: Chilies, kerosene, methylated spirits, salt etc, will burn, harm or kill pests.
- Oil: Mineral oil and vegetable oil will suffocate soft-bodied pests.
- Soap: Natural vegetable based soaps or detergents are added to sprays in small amounts to make them stick to plants. Many insects dislike soap and are harmed by it as well.
- Plant things that attract good insects that will eat the ones you don't want on your plants. Dill, coriander, chives, parsley, nasturtiums, garlic, radishes, beans, leeks, marigolds, and onions will keep a variety of pests away naturally.
- Rabbits and Raccoons: these pests are persistent but you can keep them out of your garden by surrounding it with wire fencing. Raccoons are not as deterred by fencing. They are smart and fearless – good luck keeping them away from your garden!
- Herbs and flowers: These are good things for your garden as they attract bees and butterflies that will pollinate your plants to help them flower and grow.

Step 6: Tips for feeding

- Test your soil before adding anything to it in a significant quantity. You want to see how “healthy” the soil is before enhancing it.
- Organic fertilizers need warm soil for microorganisms to break them down. This process takes some time so be patient as the microorganisms may not be ready to work when your plant needs the fertilization the most.

- Read labels for the nutrient content in different fertilizers. Ask a garden centre expert to help you pick out the best fertilizer for your garden.
- Blood meal provides nitrogen and iron. Bone meal provides phosphorus and calcium.
- Fish-based fertilizers provide nitrogen and phosphorus but may be more expensive than blood or bone meal.
- Potassium can be found in seaweed formulas, potash, and wood ash.
- Banana peels and home compost provide phosphorus
- Manure varies in its nutrient breakdown. Ask for assistance from a garden centre expert to help you pick the best type of manure for your garden.
- Epsom salts can boost magnesium content of the soil.
- Rotten tomatoes and pumpkin vines can improve soil in your garden plots. Work this waste into the soil to help it break down more.

Sources:

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