

*News Article*

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Date: February 19, 2018

Please use by: March 8, 2018

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## Plan your garden

Many of us have the excitement, desire and drive to plant a garden. Maybe you are into fresh vegetables that you have grown yourself, or perhaps you enjoy flowers. I saw a marquee at a garden store once that said, "It's spring. We are so excited we wet our plants." We're not quite to spring yet, but if you are excited for spring gardening, here are a few tips to get you started.

First of all, if you have never done a soil test on your garden plot, do one this year. Many people guess the type of fertilizers their vegetables or flowers need, when you could do a little more fine-tuning using the recommendations of a soil test. The exercise will be educational and insightful for you. You'll learn the pH of your soil (acidity or alkalinity), and what your primary nutrient levels are. Most garden plants like a pH range of about 6.0 to 7.0, or slightly acid. 7.0 is neutral. Find soil testing labs at:

[https://ag.purdue.edu/agry/extension/Pages/soil\\_testing.aspx](https://ag.purdue.edu/agry/extension/Pages/soil_testing.aspx).

Second, you need to decide what to grow. If you are planning a vegetable garden, this starts with the vegetables you and your family like to eat. Then, you may consider things such as the size of the garden plot and how much time you and your family members are willing to commit to this project. You may want to start small, experience success, then work up. Enthusiasm can wane if you are trying to manage a large plot and weeds get out of control or insects invade. If you like sweet corn, do you really have the space to grow it?

Your garden location should be in full sun or nearly full sun, well-drained, with a water source nearby. Avoid locations near walnut trees, as walnuts produce a substance called "juglone" that causes many garden plants to wilt and die. This substance is present in all parts of the walnut tree, and small amounts are released by live roots, which can extend more than the height of the tree in any one direction. Even decaying roots release juglone, so many years may have to pass before an area will support a garden.

Using the plants you wish to grow, prepare a garden layout on paper. Taller vegetable plants should be positioned toward the north of the garden to prevent shading. Perennial plants, like asparagus, should be in an area best suited to growing that crop year after year. Additionally, group cool season crops together, and consider subsequent plantings of warmer season crops. Some early harvested warm season crops can be followed by a late summer planting of cool season crops for fall harvest. Also consider staggered planting dates to spread out harvest. Consult Purdue Extension publications for suggested planting dates and plant spacings.

When planning flower plantings, consider successive bloom times, and position taller flowers toward the back of the bed. Also consider color – what colors do you like best, and what colors "go together" in your mind? Clustered plantings of flowers tend to make a better impression than single or sparse plantings. Foliage texture can also add interesting features.

When weather warms up, make sure your soil is dry enough to work into a granular soil structure. If you work the soil too wet, it will tend to slab over, compact, and provide an environment unfriendly to roots. If you plan to plant frost-tender plants, wait until the danger of the last frost is past. This is usually around Mother's Day, but can be earlier or later depending on the year. Recent weather data from the Indiana State Climate Office, 1974-2003, suggests there is a 50% chance our last 32 degree frost date in Whitley County, Indiana is April 17-23, and a small pocket in the east central part of the county may be April 10-16. Keep in mind that 50% does not indicate high probability, but a 50/50 chance the average last frost date will occur in that time period.

During the growing season, we begin to deal with weeds, insect pests and plant diseases. This is the period of time many tend to lose enthusiasm for gardening. If this is you, try turning the experience into a learning exercise. Identify the weeds that took over. What insects attacked your plants? Could I have spaced my plants out to allow more air movement and discourage diseases?

Lastly, Purdue Extension has resources to help you. Search for publications on the types of plants you plan to raise at Purdue Extension's Education Store, at <https://mdc.itap.purdue.edu>. A good, general vegetable production guide is HO-32-W, Home Gardener's Guide. Purdue Extension also has publications on growing annual and perennial flowers.

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