

News Article

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Plant a Vegetable Garden

You've thought about starting a vegetable garden. Perhaps this is the perfect year to jump in and plant one. Here are a few considerations for beginners and those who have just begun in recent years.

First, 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 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://aq.purdue.edu/agry/soilfertility/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?

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.

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.

If establishing a brand-new plot, one non-chemical way to kill weeds is to tarp the area with black or opaque tarp for 3-4 weeks. Alternatively, a herbicide containing glyphosate can be used, then you wait

about a week to ten days, then till the area. If glyphosate is the only active ingredient, there should be no issues with herbicide carry-over affecting garden vegetables.

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. According to recent weather data from the Indiana State Climate Office, 1981-2010, the average date of the last 32-degree frost in spring for Whitley County, Indiana is April 22-28. Only 1 in 10 years does a 32-degree frost occur after May 7-13 in Whitley County. Dates are also available for hard frosts (28 degrees), and light frosts (36 degrees), at their website, <https://ag.purdue.edu/indiana-state-climate/>.

During the growing season, we begin to deal with weeds, insect pests and plant diseases. This is the time when 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 www.edustore.purdue.edu. A good, general vegetable production guide is HO-32-W, Home Gardener's Guide.