

How to Start a Vegetable Garden

by Birgitt Evans, Alameda County Master Gardener

There has been an increasing interest in growing food in recent years as incomes shrink, food prices go up and concern grows over healthy eating. For the novice gardener it can be hard to know where to begin. Fellow master gardener and president of the Emeryville Community Organic Garden, Sam Foushee recommends that you, "Start small and get the basics down before you invest a lot of time, effort and money."

To that I would add that it is important to consider your lifestyle: Do you enjoy gardening? How much time do you have to garden? Do you cook? If not, do you eat a salad every day for lunch? "Only grow things you know you will eat." advises Foushee.

If you still think a vegetable garden is for you, go out and survey your land. You want a flat area with good drainage that gets as many hours of sun as possible. Although



Birgitt's Garden photo by Lori Eanes

greens, peas and beans will make do with less, most vegetables require a minimum of six to eight hours of sunlight a day. And take both summer and winter sun into consideration. The back of my yard gets great winter sun while the front gets none. But the front gets all the summer sun.

Next look to your soil. **Everything** starts with soil. Whether or not you succeed depends upon the soil you start with and what you add to it. There is a great temptation these days to bypass our own soil, spending money on redwood raised beds and paying someone for a "soil mix" that may or may not contain soil and that may or may not produce good crops for more than one season. Resist the temptation to remove your precious topsoil - it took 1,000 years to build an inch of topsoil and that topsoil contains the mineral nutrients and millions of microorganisms your vegetables need to thrive. (For concerns about lead in soil, see UCANR Publication 8424 Home

Gardens and Lead: <http://acmg.ucdavis.edu/files/50347.pdf>) Almost all soil, whether it is clay or sand, can be turned into an excellent growing medium with the removal of weeds and the addition of compost (hopefully homemade) to improve its “tilth” and make it loose and friable, able to hold air, water and nutrients.

Once you have a sunny, well drained location and have decided what you want to grow and how much time you have to amend your soil, plant, harvest and use your crops, you can lay out your beds. Lay out dedicated beds that will not be walked on with paths between them and orient them east to west so that all parts of the bed receive sunshine. Your beds should be 2 - 4' wide, so that you can reach the middle easily from both sides. Make them long enough to judiciously use your space, but not so long that you won't want to walk around them. A 3' by 6' bed will hold six tomato plants or (with some planning) provide a steady supply of salad greens or give you all the peppers and eggplants you need for the summer. Tall or vining plants like peas, pole beans, pumpkins and cucumbers can be grown vertically on trellises, saving room for other crops.

Paths should be about 18" wide and able to accommodate your wheelbarrow and other tools and should be covered by a weed barrier or mulch.

Winter is the time to focus on building your soil. You can buy compost or make your own, collect leaves or visit a stable and see if they have any free horse bedding. Work about 6 - 8" of organic matter into hard or sandy soils that have not been previously amended. You can also plant a cover crop and turn it into your soil in late spring. For very hard soils, use a “Sod Buster Mix” like the one sold by Peaceful Valley Farm Supply to aerate and break up your soil. Remember, the more time you spend on your soil, the healthier your plants will be and the less time you will spend later fighting pests and diseases.

In our climate, most cool season crops can be planted starting around the beginning of February. Those include lettuces and greens, root crops, peas, broccoli, cauliflower and other brassicas, onions and potatoes. The closer you are to the coast or Bay, the earlier you can plant. You can direct seed things like lettuce, root crops and peas, following seed packet directions on spacing and planting depth or you can transplant seedlings of broccoli, cauliflower, kale or onions. For transplants, you need to consider the final size of the plant when planting. Leave 12" for brassicas and 5" for onions. Warm season crops can be planted out between late March and early May, depending on your microclimate.

The Master Gardeners operate through the University of California Cooperative Extension. For much more information on growing vegetables and fruits, visit our website at: http://acmg.ucdavis.edu/Growing_Your_Own_Food/

