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# Chapter 1

# Vegetable Gardening 101

I've been vegetable gardening my entire life. I've followed my grandfather picking stones out of the potato patch, weeded my mother's garden, taught my daughter to plant her first seeds, and built cold frames to maximize the amount of food my wife and I can grow in our yard with edible landscaping. I can attest that after you start, vegetable gardening becomes part of your life.

Here I start you off with the basics on site preparation, and I tell you what to grow and how to grow it. All the details that follow in subsequent chapters build on the information you need to know to be a successful vegetable gardener. Along the way I hope you are inspired to get some dirt under your fingernails and start your own garden. Dig in!

## Having a Garden: Yes or No

Over the years people had drifted away from vegetable gardening in the spirit of progress and affluence because of living busier lives and having smaller available spaces for gardening. However, more recently people are once again realizing that growing their own food, although not as critical to survival as it once was, is an important part of a healthy body, mind, spirit, lifestyle, and community. More people are again turning to vegetable gardening as a means of food and as a hobby. Veggie gardening is officially back!

Who can resist the flavor, smell, and texture of food literally picked minutes before you eat it? It you've ever sunk your teeth into a sun-warmed, ripe tomato and felt the juices and flavors explode in your mouth, you'll know what I mean.



REMEMBER

But vegetable gardening isn't just about taste. It's about safe food that's produced close to home. It's about knowing what has been sprayed on that food. It's about feeding your friends and family nutritious food that's high in vitamins and *anti-oxidants* (cancer-fighting compounds). It's about connecting with your neighbors and community as you experiment with ethnic dishes using exotic ingredients grown in your not-so-exotic backyard. It's about reducing pollution by not buying produce that's shipped hundreds (or thousands!) of miles to your local grocery store. Finally it's about reclaiming your ability to grow some of your own food, even if it's just a container of basil, to have a little more control in your life. If you're interested in finding out more about the popularity and benefits of vegetable gardening, be sure to check out Chapter 2.

## Planning a Veggie Garden

When's the best time to start vegetable gardening? Right now! Here are the basics on how to decide where to grow yours:

- » Find a spot close to the house that you walk by daily so you don't forget about your project.
- » Find a spot that gets at least 6 hours of direct sun a day.
- » Find a spot that has great soil.



TIP

Don't bite off more than you can chew! Keep your new garden small. You can be just as productive in a small raised-bed garden, container, or small kitchen garden as you would be if you tilled up your whole backyard. Start small, be successful, and then get bigger (if you want).

What should you put in your new garden? Well, you have many vegetable options when it comes to deciding what you can grow, so it's going to be tough deciding which ones to plant. The most important rule I can tell you is to grow what you like to eat. Yes, folks, this is all about taste. So no matter what people say about how easy beans are to grow, don't grow them if you hate to eat them. (Of course, after tasting fresh green beans from the garden, you may change your tune.) Grow a mix of varieties of favorite vegetables that you and your family will love. Also, try a few different ones to stretch your imagination. Chapter 3 has plenty of pointers to help you plan your garden wisely.

# Growing a Cornucopia of Vegetables

You can grow many different types of veggies in your yard — and not just in the backyard. These days they're pretty enough to be front and center. The following sections describe some of the most popular to get you started.

## Tomatoes

Tomatoes are by far the most popular vegetable grown — and for good reason. The difference between a vine-ripened fruit and one picked green, gassed, and shipped hundreds of miles to your grocery store is incomparable. You can choose from container varieties that produce fruit the size of a pea and giant plants that grow to the height of a garage and produce fruits the size of a softball! You can even grow varieties of tomatoes with fruits every color of the rainbow except blue (however, I wouldn't be surprised to see that color someday either).



REMEMBER

Tomatoes love the heat and sun and require fertile soil and support. Unless you're growing the dwarf varieties, stakes, cages, trellises, teepees, and arbors are essential for keeping plants growing upright and strong. You only need a few plants to keep your family in tomatoes most of the summer. Chapter 4 has the full scoop on growing tomatoes.

## Peppers and eggplants

Peppers and eggplants are related to tomatoes, but they're a little more homogeneous in their plant size. However, what they lack in plant variety, they make up in fruit uniqueness. Pepper fruits come shaped as bells or as long and thin tubular shapes. Some are as sweet as candy and others are hot enough to burn your mouth.

Pepper fruits mostly start green and end up red, but where they go, colorwise, in between is amazing. You can experiment with chocolate-, yellow-, ivory-, purple-, lavender-, and orange-colored fruits that can be eaten raw or used in a multitude of cooked dishes. Eggplants also have burst onto the scene with varieties that produce unique-colored fruits, including white, purple, striped, and even orange.



TIP

If you can grow a tomato, you can grow peppers and eggplants. They need similar growing conditions. Plus, I love them as ornamental edibles. Not only do they look good in flower beds and containers, but you can eat them too! Chapter 5 has more on peppers and eggplants.

## Carrots, onions, and potatoes

Get to the root of the matter by growing carrots, onions, and potatoes. (I know, I couldn't resist the play on words!) Carrots, onions, and potatoes love cool soil and cool-weather conditions. Start them in spring for an early summer crop or in summer to mature in fall. Here are a few fun facts on each group (Chapter 6 has more information):

- » **Carrots:** Carrot varieties are either short and squat or long and thin. You can even get colors other than orange, including red, purple, yellow, and white. Because their seeds are so small and take a while to germinate, carrots can be difficult to get started. But once they're growing you'll soon be munching on roots.
- » **Onions:** Depending on the variety, most bulbing onions are day-length sensitive and individually adapted to form bulbs in either the northern or southern parts of the country. Intermediate-day varieties do exist that develop bulbs in most locations, and non-bulbing *bunching type* green onions also can be grown anywhere. Some are sweet and can be eaten out of hand, whereas others are pungent and best for cooking and storing in winter. You can grow onions from seed, sets (bulbs), or plants.
- » **Potatoes:** Potatoes are an easy cool-season crop to grow because you plant part of the potato to get new plants. If you cover the tubers with soil, hill them up, and keep them watered, you'll be rolling in spuds come summer.

## Peas and beans

Peas and beans are like cousins. They're in the same family and share traits, but in other ways they're different!

- » **Peas** are cool-season-loving crops that produce either plump or flat pods depending on the variety. With some pea varieties you eat pods and all. With others you eat just the peas inside.
- » **Beans** love the heat. They're one of the easiest vegetables to grow. They come in bush and twining or pole bean forms.



TIP

Both are great vegetables in the garden because they require little to no fertilizer and care once they're up and running. Chapter 7 has details.

## Cucumbers, melons, pumpkins, and squash

I affectionately call cucumbers, melons, pumpkins, and squash the “viners.” They love to ramble about the garden, taking up space and producing loads of fruit. But even if you’re a small-space gardener, you can still grow these space hogs. Newer varieties of cucumbers, squash, and melons can fit in a small raised bed or even a container.

One common trait of these vegetables is that they need heat, water, fertility, and bees. Bees? Yes, bees. Most of these squash family crops need to be cross-pollinated to produce fruit, so bees are critical to success. If you’re growing other vegetables, flowers, and herbs, you’re sure to have some bees flying about to do the hard work.



WARNING

Some members of this veggie family can be prolific, so unless you’re planting to preserve your harvest, don’t plant lots of zucchinis, cucumbers, and pumpkins. Then again, if you really want to share the harvest you can plant a bunch to give away! Head to Chapter 8 for plenty of pointers on growing vining veggies.

## Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and cauliflower

Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and cauliflower are similar in how they grow and what they need to grow. However, their differences come in the parts you eat. Here’s the lowdown:

- » After you pick the heads of cabbage and cauliflower, the plant is finished and stops producing.
- » After you pick broccoli heads, you’ll keep getting more broccoli side shoots to eat all season long.
- » Brussels sprouts are like your crazy Uncle Louis. He looks a little strange, and you don’t know where he came from. Brussels sprouts produce cabbagelike balls all along a straight stem. Keep picking the sprouts starting from the bottom to the top of the stalk until it stops producing because of the cold.

This group of veggies is productive and serves as a great addition to a cool-weather spring or fall garden. See Chapter 9 for more information.

## Lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, and specialty greens

If you're looking for quick rewards, go straight to Chapter 10 and grow greens: lettuce, spinach, chard, and wild greens, such as dandelions. Because you don't have to wait for greens to form fruits (you're just eating the leaves), you can pick them as soon as your stomach rumbles and the leaves are big enough to munch. They mostly love cool weather, so start early in spring and then keep planting and harvesting.

Greens are one of the best container vegetables to grow because they're easy and adaptable. You can mix and match lettuce varieties to produce different colors and textures that look beautiful and taste divine.

## An array of other great veggies

In the previous sections, I just touch the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what to grow for vegetable varieties. There are so many more vegetables to grow; all you have to do is wander down the produce aisles at the local grocery store and think, do I like to eat that? Chapter 11 describes more than 30 other vegetables to grow — from asparagus to turnips. Watch out or you may get hooked and start growing so many vegetables you'll have to open a restaurant. Veggie gardening can become that much fun.

## Non-vegetable edibles

Don't limit yourself to growing just vegetables in the vegetable garden. That would be silly! Berries, such as blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries, and herbs, such as basil, parsley, and chives, are great additions to your yard. They produce fruit, spice up a meal, and look beautiful. Need some inspiration? Here are some suggestions (and refer to Chapter 12):

- » Consider having a strawberry patch in your garden.
- » Landscape your yard with blueberry bushes or a hedge of raspberries.
- » Mix herb plants around vegetable plants or give them their own space in the garden. Herbs also grow well in containers mixed with flowers. I love growing rosemary in a deck planter each year for the attractive foliage and the enticing aroma.

# Getting Down to Growing

Are you excited to grow some of your own food? Not so fast! You need a roadmap to get a successful start. Just like driving, if you get off in the wrong direction, it takes lots of time and effort to get back on course. So you have to start out with a plan and stick to it. The following sections are a quick run-through from seed to table of growing vegetables. After you read this section, head to the chapters in Part 2 for all the details that will ensure success.

## Choosing between seeds and transplants

The easiest way to start a new garden is to grow those vegetables that can be planted from seed directly into the soil. For veggies that are best transplanted, buy the transplants locally. (Some vegetables can go both ways, too.) Here's a breakdown of the two groups:

- » Some vegetables that can be sown directly into the ground as seeds include beans, peas, carrots, beets, and sweet corn.
- » Some vegetables and herbs you can find in local garden centers as transplants include tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, lettuce, cucumber, squash, basil, and parsley.



TIP

If you have a small garden, go with the transplants. If you're growing a larger garden, you'll find it less expensive to grow veggies from seed. Chapter 13 has details on growing seeds versus growing transplants.

## Working the soil

After you have your vegetable seeds or transplants ready to go, the temptation is to simply turn the soil and then plant. However, soil building is one of the most important parts of your gardening experience. Your soil needs to be fertile, loose, dried out, and relatively weed and rock free to grow the best crops. If you take care of the soil in your beds, it'll take care of you by producing healthy, productive vegetables with few insect and disease problems.



TIP

Spend some time working the soil by hand or with a tiller. Amend it every year with compost to keep the fertility high and make it more workable. Test your soil to see if it needs other nutrients. Flip to Chapter 14 for more ways to coddle your soil.

## Keeping your garden growing and enjoying the rewards

When your garden is up and running, you can lower your maintenance time and effort and raise your satisfaction level by doing the following (see Chapter 15):

- » Mulch your beds.
- » Water your plants deeply and consistently.
- » Fertilize when necessary.

No matter how well you care for your garden, pests still may attack your plants. It's best to grow insect- and disease-resistant varieties when possible. And be sure to create barriers to block pests from attacking, clean up the garden well to remove overwintering insects and diseases, and only spray as a last resort. I provide more on keeping your plants healthy in Chapter 17.



TIP

After all this serious stuff, comes the fun part: harvesting. Check the garden daily when plants are producing, and pick even if you don't have room in the fridge. With many vegetable plants, the more fruits you pick, the more you'll get. You always can give away the fresh produce to friends, family, and neighbors, so keep picking. Chapter 19 has details on harvesting and storing.

## Trying for a bigger bounty

To go further with your vegetable garden, try a few of the following techniques that help improve production and yield:

- » **Use containers.** Growing in containers allows you to grow plants longer into the season and position your plants in the sunniest, most protected spots around your house. Chapter 18 discusses container gardening.
- » **Practice cool farmer tricks, such as succession planting and interplanting.** Succession planting allows you to grow three or more crops in one season from the same spot. Interplanting is where you plant quick-maturing small plants, such as lettuce and radishes, around slow-growing larger plants, such as tomatoes and broccoli. The small plants are harvested before the larger plants shade them out. The gardening world has even more fun and interesting new ideas, and Chapter 16 introduces you to them.