Planning Your Vegetable Garden

By Kathy Wolfe

February 7, 2014

A Garden Success Every Time

If your New Year's resolutions included, "Grow More Vegetables," then you are not alone. Today's gardeners are finding ways to grow and enjoy vegetables and herbs in almost any yard. All gardens should begin with a good plan to achieve optimum production and to help you make decisions about where to plant, what to plant, how much, and when.

One of the most important factors for your vegetable garden's success will be choosing your site. Vegetables should receive between six and eight hours of full sunlight per day to thrive. This is particularly true of those that form fruit, such as tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, etc. Leafy vegetables, e.g. spinach and lettuce, can grow with less sunlight.

Orient your rows to run east to west for greatest sun exposure and place the tallest plants on the north end to avoid shading the rest of the garden area. Make sure that large trees and shrubs are not closely planted near your garden spot because they add shade and may steal nutrients and water from your vegetables.

Water and air drainage are important factors. Avoid low, flat areas that can flood or where water collects because these can drown the roots and the area will remain cold in the spring, delaying plant growth. Proper air drainage is often overlooked.

Because cold air is heavier and denser than warm air, it flows like water down gullies and alleys and can settle behind obstacles and in low spots, stunting plant maturation. Cold air barriers, such as a stone wall or stack of hay bales, can be constructed to divert cold air and even hold solar-generated heat.

If your yard is sloped, plant well up on a south-facing slope for best results. All sloped sites should be planted horizontally in terrace-garden fashion to reduce erosion. Check your site for windy conditions, which will chill and dry plants more quickly. While windbreaks on the side of the prevailing wind can be used, they should be 50 percent air permeable to reduce strong downdrafts on the leeward side.

Plan your site near a water source for irrigation purposes. Ideally, your garden will be near your house or other area you pass frequently so you can spot problems with diseases, rodents, insects and weeds as well as for ease of harvest and enjoyment. Do not choose an area where topsoil has been removed unless you will be bringing in soil for raised beds or working in containers. Subsoil does not contain organic matter which improves soil tilth, water-holding capacity and plant nutrients.

Few gardens are large enough to grow every plant, so decisions must be made in choosing vegetables to fit your space. Make a list of what your family enjoys, ranking the list from your

strongest preference to your least favorite. Consider what tastes best fresh and what is the most expensive to buy. Think about the number of people you will be feeding, whether you plan to can, freeze or dehydrate your vegetables and the amount of time you have to maintain the area. If you are a beginning gardener, start small. You will be glad you did.

Winter . . . Summer. The Discovery Garden vegetable patch may look empty and unpromising in February, but with proper planning it will provide a bounty of summer produce. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

What style of garden do you envision? If planting in containers, you will have to find ones large enough to allow the soil's capacity to retain water and make healthy root growth, as well as having good drainage. You may also want to choose plant varieties bred for smaller spaces by looking for words like "bush", "compact" and "space saver".

If you plan to incorporate your vegetables and herbs into your existing landscape, it is important to combine plants with similar needs and time the growing cycles to either complement each plant's strengths or hide weaknesses. You may consider a more traditional method such as single or wide rows or blocks. Will you be using raised beds or level beds? Will the shape be straight, curved or even circular? Will your pathways be covered in bark, pavers, bricks, or gravel? All of these are important decisions to make before putting the shovel to the soil.

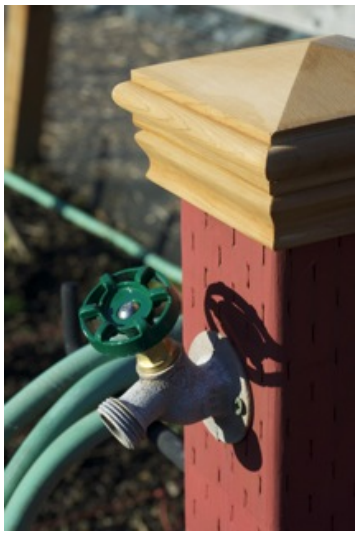
You may want to map out your garden on graph paper using one square representing each foot of space. This method helps to determine your planting scheme, calculate how much fertilizer or soil amendments you will need, as well as planning your spacing, succession planting, intercropping and crop rotations each year. You may decide to place your perennial plants, such as asparagus, rhubarb, artichokes and small fruits, in their own more permanent part of the garden away from your annual crops, which will be rotated each year. Make and date several photocopies of your map for sketching plans and taking notes.

Succession planting can double your yield. Plant cool season quick crops (lettuce, radishes, spinach, peas) followed by a later fall crop such as carrots, broccoli, beets or cabbage. Or stagger planting dates of the same crop, e.g. lettuce, every 2 – 4 weeks for a longer harvest.

You can also pair up plants, called intercropping, by seeding an area with a quick crop, such as spinach, with eggplant or pepper transplants. The long season crops will shade the short season plants, helping them to grow well into the summer months. Don't forget to factor plant spacing into your plan so you won't waste seed.

A garden calendar, made either on your computer or on paper, will help you schedule sowing and transplanting tasks and remind you how well a particular seed variety fared in harvest quality and length. Rainfall, unusual weather conditions, harvest dates and insect or disease problems can also be noted here.

By taking a few hours this winter to plan and a few minutes each week during the year to observe and record, you will increase your production and garden success every time. Now start ordering your seeds!

Left: If you plan to install a drip line (black tubes) water management system in your vegetable garden, plant together crops with similar moisture requirements. **Right:** Your vegetable garden will need regular watering. Make sure your hoses and faucets are in good condition before the season begins. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

RESOURCES:

- "Planning & Preparing Your Vegetable Site." N.S. Mansour. Oregon State University Extension. October 1999.
- "Vegetable Garden Design." WSU Master Gardeners of Clark County. April 2002.
- "How to Plan a Vegetable Garden." Ruth Lively. *Fine Gardening Magazine.*
- "Planning a Vegetable Garden." Lynn Ocone. The National Gardening Association.
- *The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide.* Seattle Tilth. 2005.
- *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades.* Steve Solomon. 2000.