

Choosing a Garden Site and Deciding When to Start Your Garden

Picking out a place for a garden is easy if you consider these four important things: sunlight, soil, water and access.

Sunlight

Most vegetable crops need at least five to six hours of direct sunlight a day (assuming a cloudless day). Areas receiving less sunlight than this should be considered for a composting site or work area. If your garden site is too shady, think about whether you can remove a shading fence, shrub, or tree. Maybe just pruning a few branches will help. (Remember to ask your landlord or neighbor before cutting a tree on someone else's property.) Light can be improved by painting nearby walls or fences white.

Soil

Of all the resources in the garden, soil is the easiest to improve. You can always make the soil and its drainage better by adding organic matter (decomposed leaves or sawdust, compost, aged manure). If you can dig about 12 inches into your soil without breaking your back or the shovel, or reaching puddled water, then you can probably grow vegetables with only a few amendments. If the ground is constantly wet or it is too rocky for a shovel to penetrate, you will probably need to add a substantial amount of organic matter or build raised beds. Also see **Fact Sheet #5 Raised Beds and Double-Digging** and **Fact Sheet #12 Compost**.

Water

Although you don't want too much water in your soil, you do need to think about getting some water when you need it. Is there a water spigot handy in your garden? How much hose do you need to reach the whole garden? If the spigot is in an inconvenient place, you may want to extend the line with PVC pipe and put a spigot nearer the garden site.

Access

Don't forget that you have to get things in and out of the garden, often big, heavy things such as wheelbarrows of compost. Identify the shortest route between your garden and your compost area, if you have one, or your garden and a loading area in the street or driveway. Keep this path open when you lay out planting areas. You may have to cut a path through shrubs or put a gate in a fence, but it is worth the effort to shorten hauling distances. Another thing to consider is how accessible your garden is to pests, both the animal kind and the human kind. Low barriers will keep dogs out, but humans are more persistent. If you have trouble, enlist neighbors to help in your garden for a share of the produce. Having someone there a lot keeps out vandals.

When to Start Your Spring Garden

All digging should be done when the soil is moist but not dripping wet. Pick up a handful of soil in one hand and squeeze it into a ball. It should feel damp, but no water should drip as you squeeze. If it is too wet, let it sit for a couple of rainless days and try again. If the soil is still

soaking wet after several dry days, then your drainage is poor, and you may wish to consider building raised bed planters. See **Fact Sheet #5 Raised Beds and Double-Digging**. Ideally, you should be able to form a ball of soil that stays together when you open your hand, but crumbles easily when you tap it with a finger. If the soil won't hold together in a ball, then it is probably too sandy to hold water and plant nutrients well. Adding organic matter will remedy this situation. If the soil is sticky wet and won't crumble easily, then it is contains too much clay. Again, adding organic matter will improve the soil to a degree. If you have extremely sticky clay that molds easily, the only way to garden is to build raised planters ten to twelve inches high and bring in soil.

When your soil is dry enough to work, add whatever it needs to grow a good crop. Most soils in our area require four things: air, organic matter, lime and fertilizer. Air is added by turning the soil as you dig (or better yet, double-dig). Our native soils usually benefit from compost or other organic matter. They tend to be quit acidic and need additions of lime every two or three years. And, they require supplementary plant nutrients, especially nitrogen. To learn more about soil tests and amendments, see **Fact Sheet #6 Soil Testing and Soil Improvement**.

Once you have decided what crops to grow and prepared the soil, you can decide when to plant. Planting dates vary according to microclimate. Those gardening very near Puget Sound or one of the area's large lakes will probably be able to start quite early. Inland gardens, particularly those in the Cascade foothills, will need to wait. During especially cold, wet springs, everyone will have to delay a bit.

As soon as the soil is ready in March plant:

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| asparagus | radishes | mustard greens |
| kale | spinach | peas |
| lettuce | chard | rhubarb |
| onions | kohlrabi | turnips |

After April 1st plant:

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| beets | cauliflower | parsnips |
| broccoli | celery | potatoes |
| cabbage | collards | |
| carrots | leeks | |

Wait until after mid-May to plant:

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|------------------|----------|----------|
| beans | peppers | okra |
| Brussels sprouts | squash | pumpkins |
| cucumbers | corn | tomatoes |
| melons | eggplant | |

For more information on what to plant, see **Fact Sheet #2 Deciding What to Plant**

Because the Northwest has relatively cool summers, it is difficult to grow some of the heat-loving crops here. Choose early-maturing varieties and set them out as well-established transplants whenever possible. Using heat retention aids, such as raised beds, cloches, cold frames and row covers, will also help. See **Fact Sheet #19 Row Covers for Vegetable Gardens**.