

Top 5 Tips for Successful Vegetable Gardening

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Vegetable gardening has always been popular, and in recent years even more people have become interested in growing some of their own food. There is tremendous satisfaction in eating home-grown produce, started from seed and nurtured along until harvested and prepared for the table. Successful vegetable gardening can significantly supplement the family food budget. It also brings peace of mind in knowing how the food was grown, and getting children involved can teach them valuable lessons about science, nature, and good nutrition.

Vegetable gardening can be a source of enjoyment and exercise, and there are some things you can do to make the experience better by preventing problems and reducing maintenance. Below is a “Top 5” list of ways to increase your chances of successfully stocking your kitchen with home-grown vegetables.

Number 5: Don’t bite off more than you can chew! Be realistic about how large of a garden you have the time and ability to maintain. Nothing is more frustrating than planting a big garden, only to watch it grow up with weeds or have produce over-ripe because you don’t have the time to harvest it all. A small garden can produce an amazing amount of food.

If you have only a small space available and want to maximize the amount of produce per square foot, grow heavy producers such as lettuce, cabbage, carrots, bush cucumbers, bush squash, tomatoes and green beans. Other good choices are onions, beets, spinach, broccoli and cauliflower. Stay away from the heavy space users, such as sweet corn, vining squash, pumpkins and even potatoes.

Number 4: Think vertical. The more you get your vegetables off the ground, the less problems you’ll have with disease or damage from slugs, field mice and other wildlife. Stake tomatoes early in the season and continue to tie new shoots up so they don’t bend over and touch the ground. This helps reduce humidity around the lower foliage which results in less fungal diseases such as those that cause tomato blight. It also keeps the tomato fruits from touching the soil which often causes them to rot or be otherwise damaged.

Set up vertical or angled trellises for anything that vines, such as pole beans, cucumbers, squash, or peas. Not only does this take up less space in the garden and protect the produce, but it makes harvesting much easier.

Number 3: Make watering simple. Overhead watering not only wastes a lot of water through evaporation and watering of paths and other unused spaces in the garden, but by getting leaves and vegetables wet, it encourages diseases.

Instead, set up soaker hoses, T-tape systems or drip irrigation to water the soil in the root zones of your plants.

Laying a soaker hose alongside a row of beans or cucumbers early in the season means that when your garden needs water, all you have to do is attach a hose to the end of the soaker hose and turn on the faucet. No pulling hoses or moving sprinklers within your garden, and the water from the soaker hose goes right where it's needed—to the roots of your vegetable plants.

Number 2: Cover your plants. It's disheartening to see your precious young vegetable plants being chewed on by insects who have come in for a meal or to raise their families! Floating row covers are a gardener's best friend. Made of a very lightweight, see-through fabric, floating row covers are placed loosely over your plants and anchored on all sides. Rain and sunlight can get through to the plants, but insects can't! Roll back the cover occasionally to weed or inspect plants.

This is the best, organic way to keep your broccoli, cabbage or cauliflower from being infested with little green caterpillars, which are the larva of the white and yellow butterflies you commonly see flying around. It also can protect plants against flea beetles, potato beetles, squash bugs, tomato hornworms, and other common pests. Row covers can even protect crops like lettuce and carrot tops from feeding by rabbits. Just remember that if it's a plant that needs pollination, such as squash or pumpkins, you'll need to remove the cover once blooming starts so that the bees can have access and do their jobs.

Number 1: Mulch, mulch, mulch. Once the garden is planted, most of the maintenance comes in the form of weeding. A nice deep layer of mulch can prevent weeds from sprouting in the first place. Use organic mulch such as grass clippings, pine needles, straw, or last year's chopped leaves between rows or around hills of vine crops. Layer it 3-4 inches deep to be sure to smother weed seeds in the soil and keep them from sprouting.

Newspaper makes a great mulch as well. Place a layer of 7-8 sheets around plants, then cover with some grass clippings or other organic mulch to keep the paper from drying out and blowing away. By the end of the year, the decomposing paper can be worked into the soil to break down and add organic matter. Black plastic can also help control weeds, but must be removed at the end of the season. Anything you can do to prevent weeds from sprouting in the first place means you'll have that many less to pull in the heat of summer! Another benefit to the mulch is that it reduces soil drying resulting in less irrigating.

Setting up trellises, laying soaker hoses, mulching and covering plants with row covers takes a little extra effort early in the season, but it's time well spent, and it should result in a healthier, more productive garden.