



SPRING

Vegetable Gardening and Composting

Spring is the perfect time to get composting and start a vegetable garden. Both are wonderful activities to be shared and enjoyed by your entire family, with great benefits for the environment.

GROWING YOUR VEGETABLE GARDEN

What Goes In

You should always plant what you like to eat. Your selected vegetables do, however, need to be able to grow in our area and fit in the allotted space of your garden. Corn, for instance, is a space hog and takes months to mature. Pole beans, take up very little space and keep producing for weeks.

Think about Timing

If you would like to have fresh picked vegetables all summer, you'll want vegetables that begin ripening early and keep producing. These include tomatoes, peppers, radishes, lettuce, beans and broccoli. If you'd like to grow as much food for your family as you can, you should consider vegetable varieties that mature in large batches, like squashes.

Planting from Seed or Transplants?

You need to decide whether you are going to grow your vegetables from seeds or from young plants purchased at the nursery. Seed packets give you most of the information you'll need about whether to direct seed in the garden or whether you'll need to start them before your last frost.

Vegetables that are Usually Direct Seeded

Beans, beets, carrots, corn, cucumbers, garlic, lettuce, micro greens, okra, parsnips, peas, pumpkins, radishes, rutabaga squash, turnips, watermelon.

Vegetables that Transplant Well

Basil, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, cauliflower, celery, chard, chives, collards, eggplant, endive, escarole, kale, kohlrabi, leeks, mustard, okra, onions, parsley, peppers, tomatoes.

Whatever your choice, you'll want to get your plants in the ground as early as possible, to give them time to acclimate with the warming weather and to give them the longest growing season possible.

The Ingredients of A Successful Garden

Sun and Water: You are going to need a sunny location, with close access to both a water source and your kitchen.

Soil: Soil is the most important factor in your vegetable garden. The soil in your garden needs to be rich in organic matter.

Beds: One of the easiest ways to ensure great soil is to create raised beds. This means the soil you're growing in is higher than the ground level by 6 or more inches. Raised beds allow you to control the soil in the planting area. It never gets stepped on and compacted and it drains well.

Fencing: Deer and other animals would be happy to sample to fruits of your labor. A fence will help keep them out.

Planting in Containers: Vegetables that take up little space, such as carrots, radishes and lettuce, or crops that bear fruits over a long period of time, such as tomatoes and peppers, are perfect for container vegetable gardens. What you can grow in a container vegetable garden is limited only by the size of the container and your imagination.

COMPOSTING

The EPA estimates that yard trimmings and food residuals together constitute 23 percent of the U.S. waste stream. That's a lot of organic material going to waste! You can put this all to use by composting.

What is Composting?

Basically, composting is nature's own recycling process. Anytime a plant dies, its remains are attacked by microorganisms and insects in the natural environment. When the plant has fully decomposed, valuable nutrients are recycled into the newly produced humus, or compost.

The act of composting is putting organic materials in a pile or container, along with water. This pile is turned periodically and the beneficial bacteria will thrive. This creates high heat and breaks down the raw organic materials into a dark, rich, soil-like product. There will be no discernible original parts, and finished compost has a fresh, earthy odor.

Getting Started

You can make your own compost pile, or purchase an aerated bin with a handle system. You can find many options to choose from your local garden or hardware stores, or with a bit of online research.

How Do I Make Compost?

Compost needs three essential ingredients:

- * Green material
- * Brown material
- * Sufficient moisture

Green material is high in nitrogen. Kitchen scraps like coffee grounds, peelings, fruit cores, and eggshells are all considered green material. Grass clippings, leaves, and pulled weeds are also green materials.

Brown material is high in carbon. Paper, sawdust, small branches and twigs, and straw all fall into this category.

Water is the final key ingredient in a thriving compost pile. You want your pile to remain damp, but not dripping wet. If you do not get enough rainfall to suffice, dump a bucket over it once a week to keep things moving. You will know that your compost pile is right if it becomes hot in the middle. This is important to sterilize the compost and kill the weed seeds or bad diseases that may be there. The heat is your proof that the ratio is working for your compost pile.

What Else Do I Have To Do To My Compost Pile?

You need to turn your pile from the outside in about once a week. This just means shoveling the outer portion of the pile towards the inside all around until you have rearranged it so that fresh compost is now exposed. This way, all the beneficial organisms can have a chance to work on all of the pile's ingredients.

If your pile heats up, gets moisture, and gets turned regularly, you should have dark, wonderful compost in about one to two month's time.

I Have Compost, Now What?

Use this fertile addition in large quantities in the spring to the soil you are going to plant in (like in your vegetable garden!). Use it throughout the season to top off any soil that has become tamped down due to water runoff or settling. In the fall, break down your garden and put any parts of it that are not diseased back into a new compost pile to work all winter and you will have new compost to use the following spring.

