

Q. I want to grow some of the food for my family this year. I am new to gardening. Where do I start?

A. Congratulations on deciding to ‘grow your own.’ Growing your own fruits and vegetables can be a lot of fun, and the produce you harvest will thrill your taste buds. There are a few important factors to take into consideration before you begin:

- 1) How much light does the ground receive? Vegetable and fruit gardens need a minimum of 6 hours of direct light a day.
- 2) What will your water source be? Vegetables and fruit trees need regular watering, which can be expensive.
- 3) What kind of soil will you be gardening in? You can amend both sandy soils and clay soils, but you need to know what you are starting with.

Assuming that you have an area with full sun, and a good water supply, your first step is to prepare the bed. It is a good idea to have beds that are about 42” (slightly over a meter) wide so that you can reach in to harvest and to weed without stepping on and compacting the soil. Remove all weeds and spread 3-4” (10 cm) of finished compost over the soil. Double digging is an excellent way to get in shape and to loosen heavy soils. Double digging allows roots to penetrate deeply into the soil for water, air and nutrients. Begin at one end of the bed and dig a 1-foot-wide by 1-foot-deep (31x31cm) trench across the bed's width, placing the excavated dirt in a wheelbarrow. Next, work a garden fork into the floor of the trench and slowly rock it back and forth to loosen the soil. Dig a second, similar-size trench next to the first, this time placing the excavated soil in the first trench. Loosen the soil at the bottom of the second trench with the garden fork. Dig another trench and backfill the second trench, loosen the bottom of the third trench, and continue this process until you reach the end of the bed. Fill the last trench with the soil excavated from the first. This workout doesn't have to be repeated yearly, but will need to be done every third year in areas with heavy clay soils. Rake the bed into a tidy rectangle, flat on top. Cover the soil with another 2’ (5cm) of finished compost. Water until the soil is moist down to an 8” (20cm) depth. You are ready to plant!

This time of the year is perfect for direct seeding root vegetables (beets, carrots, radishes, potatoes etc.) onions, salad greens (lettuce, arugula, endive, radicchio, mizuna, mache etc.) and cooking greens (chard, spinach, kale, mustards). Soils should have warmed up by the end of April for the warm season crops like tomatoes, squash and corn.

If you would like information on how many feet of a specific crop to plant for a family, contact the Master Gardener office at 925 646-6586.