

Good planning is essential for a successful harvest. You'll save a lot of time and disappointment later on if you have a workable plan for your garden prepared well in advance of planting.

The first step to good garden planning is finding an acceptable site. Few backyards are perfect, but you'll have better luck if you place your garden in a spot where it will receive at least six to eight hours of sunlight a day. The site should be well-drained and close enough to the house for easy maintenance. A slight slope is also preferable.

Fertile soil is another feature to look for when selecting a garden spot. But don't give up in despair if the soil in your backyard seems tougher than cement. Even the worst soil is easily improved by adding manure, leaves, compost, old straw--anything to increase its organic content.

Then, after you select your garden site, make a list of what vegetables you want to grow, and study their spacing and cultural requirements. This way you'll know approximately how much garden space you'll need to dig. Or, to be more accurate, sketch the entire garden on paper, with the vegetables correctly spaced according to seed packet instructions.

If your yard is too small to accommodate all your favorite crops, eliminate some from your list. Squeezing too many vegetables into an area may become unproductive and messy.

When you are sketching the garden plan, always be sure the vegetable rows run in an east-west direction. North-south rows will shade each other as the sun moves across the sky. Taller crops should run along the north side of the garden. Also, be sure to consider including some flowers in your garden plan. They'll make the garden work more enjoyable and will make up for the space they use by attracting valuable pollinating insects.

Throughout the planning stages, try to keep long-range production goals in mind by leaving yard space for the perennial crops, such as rhubarb, asparagus, strawberries, raspberries, and grapes. Place these crops along the north and east borders of your garden where they can grow, undisturbed by yearly garden cultivation. Once established, these plants will become the backbone of your garden.

In one plan, four 10 x 10 beds, located close to a back door, may produce a steady supply of fresh vegetables and herbs throughout late spring, summer, and fall. Inexpensive concrete paving slabs, laid on strips of black plastic, can crisscross the space between plots. The blocks form an all-weather path that makes caring for and harvesting the garden easier and keeps it neatly defined and attractive. Much of the space would be used twice: early crops of lettuce, radishes, peas, and spinach are followed by mid-season plantings of bush beans. Herbs would be conveniently planted nearest the kitchen door to snip and use at the last minute to perk up family meals.

When possible, space is saved by gardening vertically. Tomatoes, pole beans, and other crops that like to climb grow on stakes to prevent them from rambling over other lower-growing produce. The resulting harvest is cleaner and demands less stooping for the gardeners.

In another plan, a strip of land 13 feet wide across the back of a yard could be used, so the family's outdoor living and play area would not be broken up. The garden bed can be raised above ground level with stacked railroad ties for aesthetic appeal and because a special soil mix was to be added over the poor soil left in the yard by the contractor who built the home. Besides several truckloads of garden loam, the soil mix would include compost, rock phosphate, cottonseed meal, and sand.

But before you plan for a raised-bed garden, there are two facts worth remembering. First, the soil tends to dry out quickly because it's farther from subterranean water supplies. Although the ground-level garden can get by on one thorough watering per week, the raised bed will need water at least every other day. And, second, the soil will compact more easily, which means you should avoid walking on it whenever possible. Use a wide board to stand on when planting seed or weeding between rows.