

HOW TO START A VEGETABLE GARDEN

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Introduction

Growing your own vegetables can be a very rewarding experience. It will make you feel good to eat food grown with your own two hands and to share them with your family and friends. Creating a garden takes a lot of time and energy but if you work hard you can make a success of it. But you must plan your garden before you start to make sure that it is done in the right way. These simple rules will help you to do your best.

A. Find a good place to put the garden

Plant in areas where there is more sunlight than shade. Make sure that no trees are blocking the sunlight. Protect your garden from animals, especially dogs, which like to dig in the soil. You can plant your garden directly in a plot in the ground or in pots or other containers. Leave space around the plot so that you can tend to all the plants in the garden. Make sure a pump is nearby to provide water.

B. Use the right tools

Use a small hand spade to dig in the soil and a rake to scratch the soil and level it. A shovel can also be used to dig into the soil and turn it over. Be careful when handling tools. Put tools away when you are finished your tasks. Do not leave them lying around.

C. Prepare the soil

Mark out the area into a square or rectangle with string to get a perfect square or rectangle. Use wooden boards, blocks or large stones to enclose the area. For plants to grow well, the soil must be fertile and well drained. Chicken manure can be added to the soil to improve it. Any large stones or rocks must be removed, otherwise they will make it difficult for the roots to develop properly. If you are planting root crops like sweet potatoes, beets and carrots, you can build mounds or raised beds to give the roots more room to grow.

D. Choose the right seeds

Find out what vegetable crops grow best for the time of the year that you are preparing your garden. In The Bahamas, most vegetable crops do better during the cool season from late September to March. After that it gets too hot for them to do well. There are some seeds that do well during the hot season, if they are given some shade and are properly taken care of. These are heat tolerant plants and are specially developed for the hot tropics. Sometimes, seeds can be saved from the fruits and vegetables that we eat (such as tomato, cantaloupe and watermelon). New plants can also be grown from parts of a plant such as the stem (cassava, sweet potato) and root (sweet potato, eddie).

E. Plant the garden

A seedbed is used to sow the seeds before we transplant them to the vegetable plot where they will grow. The seedbed can be placed in a small section of the vegetable plot. The young plants in the seedbed must be shaded from the strong sunlight to protect them. Some seeds need to be thinned out from the seedbed and transplanted. This strengthens the root system and gives them more room to develop. Other plants must be planted directly into the soil, as they do not recover well from the shock of transplanting (for example, watermelon, cucumber and pumpkin).

F. Take care of the garden

The garden must be taken care of in order to have a good harvest of vegetables. Water is needed for the plants to grow. It is better to soak the ground thoroughly once a week rather than give a small amount of water every day. It must be kept clean of weeds. Do not let the weeds take over your garden. Pull them out as soon as they appear. Fertiliser can be added to the soil before planting or after the plants have sprouted. Chicken manure can be used, but

it must be allowed to age for about 6 to 8 weeks before being used.

Insects, snails and other pests can be a problem in your garden. These can be picked off the plant or removed by hand. If chemical pesticides are used, care must be taken to correctly follow the instructions on the label. Protect the eyes and skin from direct contact with the chemicals and avoid breathing in the fumes.

G. Harvest your vegetables

Generally, vegetables are ready for harvest after about 90 days from planting of the seeds. Keep fruit on the plant for as long as possible. Harvest them when they are ripe for the best flavour. They may also be harvested earlier, if young and tender vegetables are preferred.

H. Grow vegetables for fun

There are many interesting vegetables that you can have a lot of fun growing. Some of these have very unusual shapes and colours. They can make your garden look very attractive and can turn your friends "green with envy".