

Vegetable gardening

Home vegetable gardens can help your environment. By growing your own vegetables you can save on water use and ensure what you eat is pesticide free. This reduces pollution. Producing your own compost reduces carbon emissions and reduces unnecessary waste in landfills. Every garden or balcony has a spot where herbs or veggies can be grown.



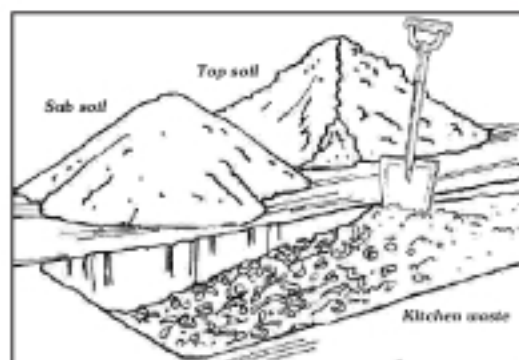
Growing fresh vegetables is one way of keeping healthy. When planning a vegetable garden, you need a sunny area of the garden which receives at least 6 hours of direct sunlight a day and a water source close by to allow for easy watering and maintenance.

TIP: Raise your vegetable beds to ensure good drainage.

Preparing the beds

Healthy vegetables need fertile soil. Soil provides plants with nutrients and minerals. Prepare your soil by:

- Collecting garden and kitchen waste for a few weeks.
- Dig trenches in your selected area. Each bed should be at most 1m across, with narrow pathways in between. This allows easy access for picking and maintenance, without standing in the beds.
- Step 1: Dig first 30 cm of soil (healthy soil) and keep it in one heap.
- Step 2: Dig the next 30 cm of soil (poor sub soil) and keep it in a separate heap. (It is acceptable to only do Step 1).
- Water the trenches well.
- Place the garden and kitchen waste in the trench. Allow it to settle for a few days.
- Mix the top soil together with some well rotted compost and return it to the trench. Use the poor subsoil to make paths around your beds.



Sowing seeds



Before sowing seeds into trays, give the trays a good wash. This helps prevent diseases. Compost used must always be well rotted. Smaller seeds require finer compost than larger seeds (seedling mix). Fill your seed tray with this mix to the top and then flatten it off. Firm the corners of the tray with your fingers then even out the rest of the mix. Sow the seeds according to the instructions on the seed packet. After sowing water the seeds lightly with a rose head watering can.

If sowing directly into the open ground, prepare your beds and then sow the seeds as per the instructions on the seed packet. Plant a variety of vegetables and plant new seeds every 3 to 4 weeks to ensure a varied and continued supply of crops. Vegetables easily grown from seed are pumpkin, peas, beans, spinach, tomatoes and onions.

TIP: Seeds are also a great way to introduce kids to gardening (try radishes or beans as these germinate in 4 days!)

Container gardening

No space for a vegetable garden? Try carrots, radishes, and lettuce, or crops that bear fruits such as tomatoes and peppers. Root crops and leaf crops can tolerate partial shade, but vegetables grown for their fruits need at least six hours



of direct sunlight each day. Containers, pots or tyres must be big enough to support plants when they are fully grown, hold soil without spilling, and have adequate drainage. Container soil must drain well and be high in organic matter.



Containers can dry out very quickly, especially on a concrete patio in full sun. Lift containers onto "feet" to allow for air movement beneath. Daily or even twice daily watering may be necessary. Once a week apply water until it runs out the drainage holes. The soil should never be soggy. If plants are kept too wet they can suffer from root rot. Mulching and windbreaks help reduce water requirements for containers.



No till gardening

No till vegetable gardening is the practice of never turning your soil. Turning your soil disturbs beneficial organisms and destroys the soil structure. Once your beds have been prepared don't turn them again, but apply organic matter on top and let the insects, fungi and bacteria break it down and take it into the soil. No till leads to high quality tasty crops and means fewer weeds, less disease and more time to do other things in your garden.



TIP: To reduce nematodes in your soil plant marigolds amongst your vegetables.

Mulch

Like a blanket, mulch covers the soil. Mulch placed around plants regulates soil temperature, reduces soil compaction and increases soil water retention. It also inhibits the growth of weeds. Take care to keep the mulch a few centimetres away from the plants stems to prevent stem rot.



Examples of mulches suitable for vegetable gardening are: compost, wood chips, straw, autumn leaves, shredded newspaper and grass cuttings. Other mulches include plastic sheeting which retains heat, this can also be used to sterilise your soil before planting.

Seeds need light and oxygen to germinate and importantly need to be kept moist. The mulch layer must be thin (5mm) and light enough to allow the seedlings to push their way through.



TIP: Good plants for hard (compacted) soils are sunflowers, sweet potatoes and carrots as these crops help break up the soil naturally.