

Starting a Vegetable Garden

Why Grow Your Own

There are several reasons why you might want to grow your own vegetables. These are my reasons.

Freshness – you can pick your vegetables the same day you eat them

Hard to find varieties – you can find heirloom varieties, new or unusual varieties and help preserve the seeds. You can grow the just vegetables you or your friends like.

Protect your health – you know how your food is grown, ideally without the use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers

Closer to nature – you become part of the process and have pride in what you grow. You can enjoy being outdoors.

Exercise – you have to get up and down, lift things, stretch and bend.

Siting the Garden

The best orientation for a garden, especially in New Mexico, is on the east side of your house with some protection from north winds (conifers or walls) and south sun (shade trees, trellises, and walls). With east canyon winds a real possibility for us, an east facing wall or shrub hedge helps too. An east facing garden gets afternoon shade. Only a few crops can stand up to all-day sun and our altitude.

Rows/Beds/Containers

There are several ways to build the garden: in raised or sunken rows, in raised or sunken beds, or in containers using potting soil. If you are starting your first garden, you might try large tub containers with potting soil (not garden soil). The advantage to the containers is that if you don't site them properly, you can move them. Also, they use less water and are easier to protect in case of frost – just cover with an old sheet. They also weigh less because potting soil was developed for shipping plants from growers and nurseries.

Rows can be slightly above or below ground level and a soaker hose or drip irrigation can be used for watering. A timer can be placed on the hose attached to your faucet or you can use a zone on your automatic irrigation controller. You can amend the soil or have garden soil delivered to use in this type of garden.

Beds are built with edging whether stone, block, or lumber. Lumber deteriorates over time however and will need to be redone. Garden soil is used in these beds too. Raised beds can be built at a height that works for you with a cap so you can sit or taller with no cap so you can stand. You can create a PVC hoop over the bed to extend the season, shade some crops, or keep some pests away. You do have to open the area occasionally for pollinator access.

The depth of the bed depends on what you want to grow – carrots, parsnips, and turnips take a deeper bed.

What to Grow

Cool Season Vegetables

These vegetables like cold weather and grow best when the soil is cooler. The following is a short list of cool season vegetables. Hardy means “frost hardy”. We are in USDA hardiness zone 7. The Master Gardener book on Gardening includes the planting time(s) for various vegetables for this part of the state. Seed packets can give you hints for when to start seeds or transplants, but local knowledge is always better.

Hardy: broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, collards, kale, kohlrabi, mustard, onion, peas, radishes spinach, turnips

Half Hardy (handles less frost): beets, carrots, cauliflower, celery, endive, lettuce, parsnips, potatoes, Swiss chard

Warm Season Vegetables

These vegetables grow in warmer weather (at least 70 degrees) and may stop growing when temperatures reach 85 degrees. In Albuquerque that means vegetables start growing in late April/early May but may shut down in June and not start growing again until monsoons cool afternoon temperatures. You can plant earlier in April, but you’ll need to protect the plants if a freeze is forecast.

Tender: green beans, sweet corn, black-eyed peas, tomatoes

Very tender: cantaloupe, cucumber, eggplant, chile and bell pepper, lima bean, okra, pumpkin, summer squash, sweet potato, watermelon

Options for Starting Plants

You can get plants into the garden in two ways: transplants or direct seeding. Some plants don’t transplant well e.g. peas so they must be direct seeded. Starting your own plants from seed is an amazing experience. You’ll need seeding trays, a transparent cover, seedling potting soil, grow light, and a heating pad. Radiant heating makes the heating pad unnecessary.

A few hints for starting your own plants include: raise the grow lights if the seedlings begin to grow into them, plant two seeds per hole, and put the lights on a timer. Seeds have different requirements so don’t mix seeds in a tray unless they seedlings have the same needs. Finally, you need to harden them off before putting into the garden. That means bringing them outside (eastern exposure) for an increasing amount of time each day to allow them to adapt to outside sun and wind. Of course, you can always buy transplants, but your choices are much reduced.

Direct seeding is just that. You seed directly into the garden. Be sure to develop a plan where each type of seed is planted and use markers to identify the variety. Paper seed packets deteriorate. Rotate crops each year so you don’t wear out your soil. Amending the soil with compost or other “missing” ingredients (usually iron and zinc) also helps. With containers and potting soil I worry about this less since I change out the soil.

Fertilizing

My favorite fertilizers are fish emulsion that has not had the nutrients heat-processed out and liquid seaweed. Follow the labels for application and timing.

Fall Gardens

Use seeds with a shorter “days to harvest” number and plant according to the table in Down to Earth or the NMSU recommended schedule for the central part of the state. One of failures/success was a fall lettuce crop. I direct seeded some varieties, but they didn’t grow very well and were not ready in the fall. I used a pup tent shaped cover with shade cloth over the winter and took off the cover in the spring. The lettuce took off and I had early lettuce, my best ever crop.

Other Reference Sources

Down to Earth was already mentioned as a source of local gardening experience, but there are many books available on growing vegetables and now online videos too. Just take any information that is not local with a grain of salt. Most areas of the US have acid soil and lots of organic matter in it. We have alkaline soil and little organic matter. Here you need to add compost and FEEDDha formulated iron to grow most vegetables. I hope I got you excited about starting a vegetable garden and I’d love to hear about your experiences. Feel free to share your vegetables with me too.