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# THE GREAT GARDEN SCHEME

*Newbie gardeners, have no worries. Plot along with this guide to grow the hottest garden spot, even in the cold season.*

BY NANCY MANN JACKSON

**E**verybody's doing it. Growing their own food, that is. But without a wide expanse of land in which to make plenty of mistakes, urban gardeners must plan their plots deliberately, finding ways to yield the most food from the smallest spaces.

Garden planning is both an art and a science; the perfect design depends on your family's food preferences as well as each plant's growing tendencies and expected yields. Learning the nuances can take new gardeners a few seasons: Do spicy foods, like peppers, and milder foods, like squash, grow well next to each other? Will four tomato plants yield too many, too few or just enough tomatoes for your family?

Careful planning the first (or second or third) time around can help you avoid garden burnout and gain confidence, guarantee your gardening pleasure as well as the resulting meals. Start with these tips from gardening experts to ensure that you'll have the hottest plot in the neighborhood.

## SCOUTING LOCATION

In gardening, location is as important as it is in real estate. "Frequently, I see veggie plots where they are conveniently located, not where they would be best suited," says Zachary Herigodt, owner of Yard Farm Austin, which

offers organic-garden design, consultation and installation in Austin, Texas. "Vegetable plants have basic needs that must be met, which primarily consist of soil, water and sun. It is crucial that the plot receives a minimum of six to eight hours of full sun each day. Position the garden [in a place] where it will not be too difficult to access when watering and tending."

In addition to planting in a location with plenty of sun and access to water, place your garden in an area that you see every day. "If possible, keep it within view of a door leading to the outside or a window," says Michael Podlesny, president of Mike the Gardener Enterprises, LLC. "I have found, not only in my own experience but in talking with others, when you can see your garden every day, you are more than likely able to maintain it a lot better. Avoid the [potential for] 'out of sight, out of mind' whenever possible."

While a vegetable garden consisting of a few pots on the back patio can be bountiful, an ideal size for the average urban family is about 100- to 200-square feet, says Colin McCrate, co-owner of the Seattle Urban Farm Company, which plans and builds residential and commercial gardens for its clients. "That's a nice, manageable size, and you're getting a decent amount of food from it."

## GETTING THE GOODS

The right vegetables for your garden may not be the right plants for your neighbor's plot. Choosing plants to grow is a personal decision and depends on your taste buds as well as the climate in which you live. "Each locale is





*You'll be more motivated to maintain your garden if you can see it easily from your door or window.*

grow in their home garden: "Since the three of us love watermelon and cantaloupe, we dedicate the biggest portion of our urban garden to those fruits. I am the only one who eats eggplant and Brussels sprouts, so I just plant two or three plants of those. This year, we have a row of Husky cherry tomatoes since [my kids] love eating them right out of the garden as a snack, but also because we have a husky dog as our family pet, and they just liked the name. My advice is to plant what you like and determine how much by the quantity needed to feed your family."

Once you have a good idea of the foods you'd like to plant, do some research to make sure they'll grow well in your area. "Gather all the information you can about the plants you want to grow: their soil and fertilizer needs, spacing and general care," says Amy Klein, executive director of Troy, N.Y.-based Capital District Community Gardens, one of the oldest urban community-gardening associations in the country. The organization manages 47 community gardens and serves 3,700 gardeners. "Spend time studying seed catalogs and seed packets. They're filled with helpful information on germination time, light and water requirements, length of time until harvest, and disease resistance."

STEPHANIE STATION

JUDYWHITE/GARDENPHOTOS.COM

unique in its microclimate," Herigodt says. "Each crop can only be planted at certain times of the year: summer crops in the spring, fall crops in late summer, overwintering crops in fall and spring greens in January. County extension agents, garden clubs and good nurseries should all have planting calendars available. Seek them out for your local area."

Along with your climate and the time of year you want to begin planting, think about your family's food preferences. McCrate suggests making a list of the plants you actually like to eat. "It's easy to go into a nursery and see a plant that looks pretty, then plant it yourself, only to find out that no one in your family wants to eat it," he says. "Expect it to take two or three seasons to see what extra vegetables are going to waste, what you're throwing into your compost pile and what you actually use."

Annette Pelliccio, founder and CEO of The Happy Gardener, an organic gardening company in Richmond, Va., says she always involves her children in deciding which vegetables and fruits they'll

*Right: Involve your children when determining what to grow so you'll know what will best serve your family.*





Study catalogs and seed packets to take the guesswork out of gardening.

says. "People might have 30 broccoli plants in a space where they should have three, so none of them can reach maturity."

One way to avoid crowding your plants in a small space is to use vertical gardening whenever possible. "Training veggies and fruits to grow up a trellis or cage will decrease floor space needed by each plant to grow sufficient amounts of crops," Pelliccio says. "We grow beans, cucumbers and peas vertically. Tomatoes and Brussels sprouts are narrow, so they're good for small spaces, too."

In addition to learning how much space each plant needs, find out how high they will grow so you can arrange them in a way that allows sunlight to reach all areas of the garden, even after the plants get bigger. "The height of certain crops is really important," McCrate says. "For instance,

*Maintain proper plant spacing to help plants reach maturity.*

Reading up on seeds and the potential yields can also help you determine how much to plant of any given vegetable or fruit. It may take a couple of seasons to figure out how many plants will result in the right quantity for your family, but experienced gardeners recommend erring on the side of planting too little rather than too much. "Newbies should keep their garden simple and keep it fairly small so it is manageable," Podlesny says. "So many times, newbies overdo it and invariably give up because it becomes too hard or cumbersome to maintain."

Keep in mind that you only want to grow what you and your family will consume, share with friends, or preserve for later in the year. "If you walked into a grocery store tomorrow, would you buy two dozen tomatoes at once? Probably not," Podlesny says. "Know the yields of the plants you are going to grow, which are usually indicated on the back of the seed packet, and plan accordingly, based on the size of your family. For instance, a family of four can get away with two cherry tomato plants that will provide an adequate amount for an entire season."

### ASSEMBLE YOUR TEAM

Once you know which plants you're growing and how much of each one, don't just toss the seeds into the ground. The arrangement of plants will have a major impact on your garden's success.

The first thing to consider is proper plant spacing, according to McCrate. "I see lots of gardens where everything is completely crammed together," he





*Intersperse flowers with vegetables to attract pollinators like bees and butterflies.*

don't ever put tomatoes on the south side of the garden, because they will be casting shade on everything else. The same idea goes for pole beans or anything on a trellis."

Arrange your plants so they will be pollinated as necessary. Most vegetables are pollinated by insects, so plant flowers in the area to attract bees and other pollinators. "Try to have all different types of flowers blooming at different times of the year; everything will be pollinated," McCrate says. "The more bees in your yard, the better your vegetables and fruits will grow."

### CALL IN BACKUP

Gardening in a small space doesn't have to feel cramped. In fact, you probably have more available soil than you realize. "Don't eliminate other areas for growing veggies and fruits among the flowers and shrubs," Pelliccio says. "Broccoli and cauliflower and cabbage are very attractive growing among the perennial border beds of a home, and lettuce, herbs and strawberries can easily be incorporated into floral containers on a sunny porch, balcony or deck."

In addition to using flower beds and containers for fruits and veggies, Keith recommends planting smaller crops in between your main rows of vegetables. "Plant smaller-space, shallow crops between and around larger-spaced crops," she says. "For example, plant beets between broccoli; radishes and lettuce between eggplant and tomatoes."



PHOTOS BY CRIS KELLY

#### weblink:

Download the USDA hardiness zone map to help plan your garden plot at [www.urbanfarmonline.com/plantzones](http://www.urbanfarmonline.com/plantzones).

## Part of the Gang

As it turns out, humans aren't the only ones who thrive on good companionship. Fruits and vegetables also flourish when they are well-paired. Companion planting is the art of planting together those plants that seem to grow well side-by-side and keeping apart those that don't flourish in close proximity to one another.

"Many newbies do not partake in companion planting, but it can be a valuable tool," says Michael Podlesny, president of Mike the Gardener Enterprises, LLC. "Carrots and basil grow really well next to tomatoes; however, potatoes and tomatoes should be as far away from each other as possible. When in doubt, plant a deep-rooted crop, such as carrots, parsnips and rutabaga, next to a shallow-rooted crop, such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplant."

Planting hot peppers, such as jalapenos, next to milder ones, such as bell peppers, can sometimes make the hot peppers less spicy and give both types the same mild flavor. But peas and corn will thrive when planted together: "The peas grow up the corn, and the corn utilizes the nitrogen the peas put into the soil," Klein says.

For more ideas about which plants to pair together for a more bountiful garden plot, visit [www.companionplanting.net](http://www.companionplanting.net), which offers a list of plants that make good companions and those that are incompatible.

*Right: Use row covers to extend the growing season.*