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Designing an edible backyard garden

How to grow the freshest and tastiest vegetables

There is nothing more delightful than picking a basket of goodies from your very own backyard and whisking them straight to the kitchen. In today's fast-paced world, working with the land and watching your food grow helps you to slow down and enjoy what nature has to offer.

So, where do you start?

First, you need to choose the right position for your vegetable garden. It is true that few of us have the perfect spot, but a lot of thought needs to go into choosing a site that will get maximum exposure to sunlight. The amount needed depends on what you want to grow: tomatoes and capsicums need lots of sun, while lettuces and some herbs can be OK with less – these may even be positioned amongst other plants such as roses.

The size of the plot will depend on your available space and also the amount of effort you wish to put into it.

Proximity to trees

Trees provide too much shade for your crop and you also need to consider their root system. Keep your plot as far from trees as possible. If you have no choice but to grow near trees, you may need to dig a barrier around your garden to block root intrusion. Dig a narrow trench to hard clay, or at least deeper than existing roots, and set in a sheet of galvanized metal roofing or other inert heavy material which roots cannot penetrate.

Preparation

Soil preparation is essential. Any gardener will tell you that successful gardening is all about the soil. Once your beds are prepared and the soil enriched, most of your work is done!

Before you start, consider:

- **How many beds do you want to have?** You may need several in order to rotate crops – this avoids depletion of essential food supplies to your plants and stops pests and diseases from building up in the soil.
- **How big to make the beds?** Beds can be any length, but keep widths under 4 feet for ease of tending the plants in the middle of the bed.
- **Raised vs in-ground beds.** Cold climates benefit from raised beds because the soil warms faster in spring, which lets you start planting sooner. In hot climates, in-ground beds require less watering than raised beds.

For a no-dig garden, lay down newspaper then build your beds with organic matter, soil and mulch. If you choose to dig, apply organic matter and manure with mulch and dig it into your soil. Water well and leave for a couple of weeks before planting.

Final touches:

- **Level the beds and rake them smooth.** This helps uniform water absorption and sprouting.
- **Mulch the pathways between beds.** This keeps weeds from migrating into the beds.
- **Avoid stepping on finished beds.** Stepping on beds will compress soil and reduce aeration. If you need to stand on the bed, lay a plank across.

While this may all seem like a lot of work to get the beds established, it can be done in stages. If you are a beginner and it seems daunting, start with a small plot and enlarge as time and inspiration allow. If you do this part well, the bulk of your work is done. Once in place, nutrients can be added by top dressing the soil, without heavy digging or strenuous work.

You will be amazed at how plants bedded in rich organic soil will grow vigorously and have natural resistance to pests and diseases. As plants grow and produce wonderful fruit, weeds are blocked out and become less of a nuisance. Rich organic soil is not bought in a bag, it is developed and nurtured year after year using strategies such as crop rotation, green manures, and occasional applications of peat and rock phosphate.

Planting

Before planting you need to be clear on the seasons and what to plan when. This will depend on where you live. In Canberra we have hot and dry summers, then very cold and frosty winters. Some vegetables can withstand frost (lettuce, broccoli, cabbages, peas), while others are destroyed by frost (tomatoes, capsicums, beans). There are many guides on when to plant. You can find these in many books, on internet sites or even at the back of seed packets.

There is much pleasure in laying out a culinary herb garden. Annual herbs such as basil, chervil, dill and coriander look best in clumps, while parsley and chives are useful in edgings. A mix of flowers amongst your herbs and vegetables looks beautiful and also attracts the right sorts of insects into your garden. Some plants deter pests: basil amongst tomato plants is good for this purpose. Marigolds are a fabulous colour in your veg plot and also deter pests.

Once you plant your vegetables, make sure they are well watered. Apply mulch to prevent dehydration of the soil and prevent weeds. Just remember to continually top up the mulch, as it tends to decompose quickly. Mulches such as straw, lucerne and sugar cane are very good for your garden.

Succession planting

Too much produce all at once may go off too quickly. This can break your heart: after so much effort growing your own food you don't want to waste any. Instead of planting a large crop of individual vegetables, plant the same crop in succession, e.g. 2-3 times in a season, to continually have fresh vegetables.

Further tips for your successful vegetable patch

- **Check moisture level** – soil shouldn't clump or stick to your boots. Provide drainage if necessary.
- **Develop the right soil texture** – soil should be well aerated to promote root growth and worm activity. Add peat or coir as needed.
- **Compost** adds nutrient-rich humus which fuels plant growth and restores vitality to depleted soil.
- **Manure** – cow and horse manure are a good source of organic matter. They should be well aged so as not to burn any tender transplants.

Further information on this topic

For more information on setting up your garden and what to plant when, visit:

Canberra Organic Growers Society

www.cogs.asn.au .

Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network

www.communitygarden.org.au