



By Peggy Hill

Easy Vegetable Gardening

Vegetable gardening can be very rewarding, since working in the soil is good for you and there's pleasure in watching your plants grow.

Container gardening and mixing them into the existing landscape are great ways to start. But if you put in a little more effort, you'll enjoy eating lots of fresh food all year long.

Raised garden beds have a lot of benefits. Our heavy clay soils drain very poorly, but raised beds solve that problem. Raised beds also reduce soil compaction, which is better for your plants and makes weeding easier. The beds warm up faster so you can plant them earlier in spring. They are easier to work on because you don't have to lean over so far. You can produce enough to feed a family of four with four to eight raised beds, each measuring 4' x 4'.

The success of raised beds depends on what you use to fill them. In his book *Square Foot Gardening*, Mel Bartholomew advises using a mixture of blended compost, peat moss and coarse vermiculite in equal volumes. Author P. Allen Smith fills his beds with a mix of compost, good loamy top soil and sand. In either case, the quality of the compost is very important. The compost should either be a mix of several different types, a high quality product, or, best of all, good old homemade.

Location, location, location....

Vegetables need at least six hours of sun, but more is better. Make it easy to keep an eye on the garden by locating it near the house. If you choose to plant directly into the soil, the better the existing soil, the easier your job is going to be. Mix in organic matter and compost. Stop by the local county extension agency and pick up what you'll need to do a soil test. The extension service's 28-page publication ANR-0479, "The Alabama Vegetable Gardener," has great information including: a list of varieties that grow best in our climate, specific planting information, dates to set out transplants or plant seeds, and how to diagnose problems. You can either pick it up while you're there, or look online at www.aces.edu.

Now comes the fun part – deciding what to grow! Make a list of what you enjoy eating, and be realistic about the quantity. If you don't have time for freezing or canning, don't plant more than you can eat. Even your neighbors will be tired of squash, if you plant five hills.

We are blessed with a tremendous growing season. With a little knowledge and planning you can always have something fresh from the garden. Spinach, kale, parsley, oregano and thyme can be enjoyed all winter, if you plant enough. Lettuce and peas are early spring crops. When the peas finish producing, cut the tops out, and leave the roots in the soil to add nitrogen for your next crop. Tomatoes, peppers, beans, corn, squash and cucumbers are summer favorites. Broccoli, garlic, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts are best planted in fall.

In addition to rotating the types of crops you plant throughout the year, you should also rotate their location. Ideally you should wait four years before planting a plant from the same family in the same location. Tomatoes and peppers are in the same family. Peas and beans are also in the same family. When you plant the same thing in the same place year after year, the pests and diseases that like that particular plant will build up in that location. Think of crop rotation as hiding your plants.

Anyone who eats vine ripen tomatoes fresh from the garden knows they taste spectacular – a grocery store tomato can never come close – but somehow when you grow them yourself, the satisfaction of a job well done makes them taste even sweeter.

Peggy Hill writes about gardening shenanigans at www.hiddenhillsgarden.com/blog



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