



GROW NATURAL

It's good for your health

ORGANIC VEGETABLE GARDENING

Growing vegetables without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides is organic gardening. However, organic vegetable gardening means so much more. When we grow organically, we build and nourish the soil which feeds the plants which in turn feed and nourish our bodies.

How Do We Build And Nourish Our Soil?

In organic vegetable gardening we focus on building the soil first. We feed it with organic matter every year so that we can grow better vegetables. Here are some sources for organic matter for your vegetable bed:

- Collect leaves in the fall. Place them in a thick layer all over the garden and then let the worms do the work of turning them into leaf mulch.
- Collect free manure from Sunnybrook Stables. Call 416-444-4044.
- Buy a compost bin from the city and make your own compost.
- Buy triple mix and manure from a garden centre.
- Grow a green manure crop. Later, turn it under the soil for added nitrogen.
- The fact sheet "Improving Your Soil Organically for Successful Gardening" provides additional suggestions.

Where to Grow Vegetables

Locate your vegetables where they will get full sun (at least 6 – 8 hours per day). Use raised beds rather than traditional rows, which are an inefficient use of space and leave lots of room for weeds. Alternatively, consider a cottage garden or potager approach and mix your vegetables with ornamental plants. Many vegetables are very attractive and can substitute for "annuals" in your mixed borders. If space is limited, consider growing vegetables in containers, especially dwarf varieties.

Vegetable beds can be any shape so long as you can reach the middle (i.e. 2 – 4 feet wide). They can be made by mounding the soil or by constructing a frame from untreated lumber. Waist-high raised beds allow for wheelchair accessibility. Raised beds have two main advantages:

- They permit more intensive planting (e.g. in a 3-foot wide bed, 4 rows of green beans can be planted with the rows 8" apart).
- They maintain better soil quality since it is easier to avoid walking on the beds which compacts the soil making it more difficult for plants to absorb nutrients and water

No place to garden? Join a community garden. Call the Toronto Community Garden Network at 416-392-1668 (cgnetwork@foodshare.net).

What To Grow

Vegetables can be easily grown from seed. Alternatively, young plants can be bought from most garden centres. To get your vegetables off to a good start:

- Choose disease resistant varieties.
- Grow vegetables that are easy to grow and mature quickly such as tomatoes, green beans, green onions, lettuce, Swiss chard, radishes, cucumbers and zucchini.
- Avoid planting vegetables from the same family in the same area every year to reduce the possibilities of pests and/or diseases.

- Rotate locations of vegetable families from one year to the next. Vegetable groupings that are susceptible to the same diseases are:
 - Beans and peas
 - Broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, radishes and collards
 - Tomatoes, eggplant, pepper, okra and potatoes
 - Beets, carrots, garlic, onions and parsnips
- Consider companion planting. Planting two plants that are beneficial to each other seems to have some positive effects in dealing with pests.

How to Grow Your Vegetables

If you are using seedlings, most should be planted just after the last spring frost, usually around the May long weekend. The outdoor planting of seeds can be done over a much longer period:

- 5 – 7 weeks before the last frost – plant green pea seeds
- 2 – 3 weeks before – plant lettuce seeds
- 1 – 2 weeks before – plant carrot and radish seeds
- Just after the last frost – plant green bean and zucchini seeds
- 1 – 2 weeks after – plant cucumber seeds

Feed the plants with compost tea, manure tea or fish emulsion. Set up a schedule and feed them regularly. Most vegetables are “heavy feeders”. Most vegetables also require regular watering throughout their growing season. Consider using soaker hoses or drip irrigation to increase your watering efficiency.

Check your vegetables daily. This lets you deal promptly with any weeds or pests.

Feeding And Nourishing Ourselves

Just imagine the joy of picking a sun ripened tomato and popping into your mouth or biting into a fresh carrot. Organic vegetables just taste better! And your mother was right, they're good for you. Then, there's the satisfaction of growing our own vegetables and feeding our families and ourselves.

Resources:

Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Organic Gardening, Anna Kruger. Rodale Press, 2005

The Holistic Garden Creating Spaces for Health and Healing, Karen York. Prentice Hall, 2001

The Organic Home Garden, Patrick Lima, Key Porter Books, 2003

Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of Companion Planting for Successful Gardening, Louise Riotte, Storey Books, 1998.