

CULINARY GARDENING

What's not to love about a garden dripping with edible fruits and vegetables? You can take advantage of the harvest in a multitude of ways, from dedicated vegetable gardens to mixing herbs and veggies with your flower beds, to containers, trellises or raised beds of culinary delights.

Planning for such gardening requires little more than what you probably already do regarding your flowers. Except, in the case of edibles, you'll want to think more about the harvest. Plus, you can plant in successions, so that once one batch of lettuce or tomatoes is done producing, another is ready to harvest.

Location, location, location

Before you start planning which herbs or veggies to plant, let's take a look at where you plan to plant them. You have several options, some of which will be dictated by the plant, as we'll discuss later on. Overall, you'll find that vegetables and herbs prefer full sun. There are a few crops, such as lettuce, greens, cabbage and parsley that will tolerate some shade, but overall you'll want to provide as much light as possible. Soil is also crucial when we talk about culinary gardening. In general, a slightly acidic soil with a pH of 6.0 to 6.8 will benefit most vegetables. Good drainage is essential, whether you're planting in containers or in the ground. If you have problems, raised beds will drastically improve soil drainage.

Containers. Most of today's vegetable and herb cultivars adapt well to container gardening, making it possible for even the apartment dweller to have a garden to cook from. Use anything from wood to plastic, clay or ceramic. Standard 6- to 10-in. containers will work well for green onions, herbs or lettuce, provided you seek containers that are at least 8 in. deep. For plants such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, or pole beans, use containers around 5 gal. to provide the space needed for adequate growth. You are best off using transplants for your containers rather than seeding directly into the container; you can either start seedlings yourself indoors or purchase plants at a garden center. Timing wise, try to transplant when a plant has its first two to three true leaves.



Trellises. If space is an issue or if you just want to add some vertical elements to your garden, you can do more than just plant pole beans. The vine crops, such as squash, pumpkins, melons and cucumbers, can also grow vertically, with a little help. Try putting up a trellis at a slight angle and coaxing the vines to grow up the supports. You may need to tie some vines to the trellis, and with the heavier fruits, such as melons, you can use slings secured to the trellis to support their weight as they mature.

Raised beds. Elevated beds make a great solution for culinary gardening. Not only do they allow you to bring in good soil, but they provide superior drainage, cut down on weeds and also put the garden at a height that's easier for many people to work at.

The mixed garden. The lines of flower and vegetable gardening have blurred in recent years, and it's not uncommon to now find a fancy lettuce or swiss chard mixed in with annuals in the garden or even in a container. Tomatoes can add a colorful accent to a garden in late summer and corn adds a great height element as well as character for fall. In short, there are no rules when it comes to mixing and matching. However, when it comes to pest management, it's important to only use products that are labeled for safe use on vegetables.



Each issue, *Green Profit* organizes a ready-made class on livegood and hardgood topics in the form of a magazine page you can tear out, even giving it to customers who want questions answered, myths debunked and a reason to be in a garden environment, regardless of the season. You provide the customers and example products; we'll do the rest.

When to plant

Like flowers, there are cool-loving culinary plants and heat-loving ones. Cool-loving crops can be planted in the early spring, sometimes even before the last frost, and some will even be good for a late planting for a fall harvest. Such vegetables include peas, broccoli, spinach, brussel sprouts, cabbage, collards, garlic, kale, leeks, lettuce, onions, and Swiss chard.

Vegetable gardeners will often use the term, “successive planting” to refer to the replacement of one crop with another. For instance, you can plant peas early in the spring, before the last frost, and once you’ve harvested them, use that same space to plant squash or cucumber plants. In the case of lettuce, you can even squeeze it in between rows of tomatoes or plantings of squash; you’ll be able to harvest it before the tomatoes or squash grow large enough to need that extra space.

If you use this method, you’ll want to cultivate the soil in between crops. A slow-release fertilizer works best with successive planting, but if you’ve got a plant that’s a really heavy feeder, you may want to reapply fertilizer between the crops, too.

Getting specific

Vine crops. This includes cucumbers, melons, squash, gourds, and pumpkins, which all have similar requirements. These crops usually tend to do best when planted from seed, and you should do so once the weather has warmed up. As mentioned above, you can plant these on trellises, in addition to on the ground.

Asparagus. This vegetable has a slightly unique twist in that it’s a perennial. It takes three years for it to get established enough to reap a harvest, but in addition to the culinary aspects, it also has fern-like foliage that grows up to 3 ft. tall.

Basil. An easy-to-grow and classic herb that you can plant from seed after the last frost or buy as transplants. Needs full sun.

Beans. Good in the garden from mid spring to late summer. You can sow seeds directly. If you choose climbing varieties, be prepared with plenty of support; they’ll need at least 8 ft. of poles or trellis to climb on. Snap beans or lima beans can be grown in a 5-gal. window box.

Broccoli. Needs cool weather in order to mature. You can plant broccoli in containers, placing one plant per 5-gal. container or three per 15-gal. tub.

Carrots. This root crop needs stone-free soil that has been well-worked (a raised bed is a perfect spot for carrots). While they like sun, they will tolerate partial shade. Overwatering may cause roots to crack, and exposing the crowns (the top, orange part of the carrot) to the sun can make them bitter. For container growing, make sure that the container is at least 12-in. deep; window boxes work well.

Chives. This herb is a perennial that will eventually take up a 10 to 14 in. wide space in your garden. Unless you want it to reseed prolifically, it’s best to keep chives trimmed so they don’t go to seed.

Dill. It’s best to grow dill from seed in the early spring, as it doesn’t always transplant well. Takes sun or partial shade. Be sure to harvest before flowering begins.

Greenery. Lettuce and such greens love cool weather; most will go to seed when the hot weather arrives. Need lots of nitrogen; fertilize accordingly! Great for successive plantings, mixed plantings, and containers. Try a 5-gal. window box.

Mints. Beware that most mints spread rapidly! You may want to grow this herb in pots or plant them within clay tiles to eliminate their invasive nature. Most types of mint are grown from cuttings or divisions, not seed, and they love rich, well-drained soil.

Oregano. Like mint, this herb does best when propagated from cuttings or divisions or when bought as a young plant in the garden center. Provide full sun and plenty of space (20 in. or more) to grow.

Peas. If you grow peas, it’ll be one of the first things you get to plant in the spring. They won’t need much fertilizer. Some peas will need staking, but if you plant double rows right next to each other, the plants can lean on the others for support.

Peppers. If peppers are your pleasure, you’ll want to either buy transplants in the garden center or start your own from seed. They need warm temperatures, as cool nights may cause their blossoms to drop. For containers, place one plant per 2-gal. pot or five plants in a 15-gal. tub.

Radish. One of the fastest, easiest vegetables to grow! You can easily start these from seed yourself, and you can harvest them in as little as three weeks. Great for successive plantings and for containers.

Rosemary. This tender perennial is hardy in Zones 8 to 10. It’s difficult to grow from seed, so we’d suggest buying this plant. Prefers sun and slightly acidic soil.

Thyme. This classic herb can either be started from seed indoors or purchased and transplanted into the garden after the last frost. If you cut it back to about 2 in. high in midsummer, you’ll get a second harvest.

Tomatoes. You’ll either need to start your tomatoes indoors from seed or seek out small plants in the garden center. For transplants, look for tomatoes with straight, sturdy stems. Give them full sun, good drainage and wind protection. You’ll probably have to stake or cage the plants to keep them upright. Also note that tomatoes prefer slightly acidic soil. These are a classic for containers, tubs or baskets (for smaller varieties). 🍅

—Jennifer Duffield White