Few experiences can match the pleasure of savoring a homegrownvegetable, especially if you raised it yourself from a seed or seedling. In almost every case, the flavor and texture of varieties you can grow far exceed the best grocery store
produce
. Growing vegetables is also a pleasurable activity in its own right, giving you an excuse to spend time outdoors in the warm sun.

Growing vegetables doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming, especially if you follow the advice in this guide. You'll soon discover, however, that experience really is the best teacher. As your knowledge grows, so will the rewards of this productive pastime.

Picking a Site

You don't need a large space to begin a vegetable garden. If you choose to grow in containers, you don't even need a yard. But you do need three critical elements to grow good vegetables:

- Sunshine. Choose a spot that gets at least 6 hours per day.
- Water. The closer your garden to a source of water, the better.
- Good soil, something between rock-hard clay and loose sand. Luckily, fixing bad soil isn't hard.

Deciding What to Grow

It's tempting to try growing a large variety of vegetables. A better approach for a first-time vegetable gardener is to consider what you most like to eat, then narrow the list down to the easiest and most productive varieties. Some of the vegetables that meet this test include tomatoes, lettuce, radishes, peppers, snap peas, green onions, summer squash, and green beans. Vegetables that didn't make the list include corn (too much room, too few ears), asparagus (requires waiting a couple of years for the first harvest), and green peas (too limited a growing season).

Garden catalogs are your best source of ideas for vegetables to grow. Once you narrow your choices to types of vegetables, pick two or three varieties that seem promising; by growing more than one variety, you'll have some insurance if one doesn't perform well. Next year, grow the best performer again, and choose another to try.

When selecting varieties, pay close attention to the description. Some varieties produce smaller plants that are ideal for small gardens or containers. Also look for varieties that are described as disease resistant.

Laying Out Your Garden

There are two basic approaches to planning the layout of a vegetable garden:

Row Cropping.

This means planting in single file with a walking path between each row. Row cropping works best for large gardens, and it makes it easier to use mechanical equipment like hoes and tillers to battle weeds. The downside of row cropping is that it is a very inefficient use of land. Much of the soil area is used for foot paths rather than vegetable plants.

Intensive Cropping.

This means planting in wide bands, generally 1 to 4 feet across and as long as you like. This approach reduces the amount of area needed for paths, but the closer spacing of the plants means that they must be cared for by hand. This isn't a problem with most home-sized gardens. Because of the handwork required, it is important not to make the bands wider than you can comfortably reach.

A specialized version of intensive cropping is the "square foot method" developed by Mel Bartholomew. This well-thought-out system divides the garden into small beds (typically 4 x 4 feet), that are further subdivided into one-foot squares. Each one-foot square is planted with one, four, nine, or 16 plants, depending on the size of finished size of the plant. Bartholomew's book, *Square Foot Gardening* , is the bible for this method of gardening.

Whichever method of gardening you choose, start small. A 10-x-10-foot space is a good size for a first garden. Plan your garden on paper before you put shovel to earth. Allow at least 18 inches between rows or beds for easy access. As you sketch out your plan, place taller vegetables at the north side of the garden. This includes naturally tall plants -- like standard size tomatoes -- and plants that can be grown on vertical supports -- like snap peas, cucumbers, and pole beans.

It also makes sense to leave some areas of the garden un planted at first. This allows you to plant a second crop to harvest later in the season. Lettuce, radishes, green onions, carrots, and bush beans are commonly planted several times during the season.

Digging Your Beds

If you choose to plant in the ground rather than in raised beds, you'll need to loosen (till) the top 6 to 12 inches of soil. Large power tillers can grind the sod into the soil. If you choose to dig by hand, you'll need to remove the sod instead. Use a sharp, straight-edged shovel to score the turf then pry up the sod. After the sod is removed, begin loosening the soil by digging and turning. Work small sections, breaking up large clods as you work.

Once the soil has been loosened -- either with a tiller or by hand -- spread your amendments and work them into the soil. This can be tough work if you do it by hand, but the more thoroughly you perform this task, the better your results will be. Avoid stepping on freshly tilled soil as much as possible. If you must cross a tilled area, use planks or pieces of plywood to distribute your weight. Otherwise, you'll be compacting the soil and undoing all your hard work.

When you're done digging, smooth the surface with an iron rake, then water thoroughly. Allow

the bed to "rest" for several days before you begin planting.

Seeds or Seedlings?

Some vegetables can be grown only by putting seeds into the garden soil. Carrots and beans are two vegetables that require "directed seeding." With direct seeding, you place the seeds at the recommended depth, water thoroughly, then wait for the plants to emerge. In most cases, you'll plant extra seeds to account for some not germinating, then thin out any extras after the plants are up and growing.

Many vegetables can be started early indoors or purchased already started from a garden center. The benefit of this approach is that you can have a crop ready to harvest several weeks earlier than if you were to plant seeds in the ground. Starting vegetables indoors is not difficult, but it does require some time and attention. Seed packages list the options you have for planting particular seed.

Care and Feeding

Most vegetables like a steady supply of moisture, but not so much that they are standing in water. About an inch of water per week is usually sufficient, provided by you if Mother Nature fails to come through. Water when the top inch of soil is dry. For in-ground crops, that may mean watering once or twice a week; raised beds drain faster and may require watering every other day.

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Weeds compete with your vegetables for water and nutrients, so it's important to keep them to a minimum. Use a hoe or hand fork to lightly stir the top inch of soil (cultivate) regularly to discourage weed seedlings. A mulch of clean straw, compost, or plastic can keep weeds at bay around larger plants like tomatoes.

Fertilizing your crops is critical to maximizing yields. Organic gardeners often find that digging in high quality compost at planting time is all their vegetables need. Most gardeners, however, should consider applying a packaged vegetable fertilizer, following the directions on the box or bag. Don't apply more than recommended as this can actually decrease yield.

Pests and Diseases

Pests and disease are ongoing problems for most vegetable gardeners. Although specific problems may require special solutions, there are some general principles you can follow.

- Use fences to deter rabbits. Make sure the bottom of the fence is firmly attached to the ground, or even buried a few inches into the soil.
- Row covers -- lightweight sheets of translucent plastic -- can protect young crops against some insects. Row covers are also helpful to prevent damage from light frosts.
- To reduce fungal diseases, water the soil, not the leaves of plants. If you must use a sprinkler, do it early in the day so the leave will dry by nightfall. If a plant does fall prey to a disease, remove it promptly and throw it in the trash; don't add sick plants to your compost pile.

- Grow varieties that are listed as disease resistant. Garden catalogs and Web sites should tell you which varieties offer the most protection.
- Pick larger insects and caterpillars by hand. Once you get over the "yuck!" factor, this is a safe and effective way to deal with limited infestations.
- Use insecticidal soap sprays to provide safe control of listed pests. Most garden centers carry these products. Whatever pest control chemicals you use, read the label carefully and follow the directions to the letter.
- Finally, make it a habit to change the location of crops each year. In other words, if you grew tomatoes in the northwest corner of your garden this year, put them in the northeast corner next year. This practice, called crop rotation, reduces the changes that pests will gain a permanent foothold in your garden.

Harvesting

This is what it's all about, so don't be shy about picking your produce! Many vegetables can be harvested at several stages. Leaf lettuce, for example, can be picked as young as you like; snip some leaves and it will continue to grow and produce. Summer squash (zucchini) and cucumbers can be harvested when the fruit is just a few inches long, or allowed to grow to full size. The general rule: if it looks good enough to eat, it probably is. Give it a try. With many vegetables, the more you pick, the more the plant will produce.