

Home grown vegetables have always had an appeal, but as the economy slows home vegetable gardening is picking up in popularity. I have even been receiving more calls than average for this time of the year from people that have never grown a garden asking questions about how to get started. Planning a new garden has many considerations such as where to place the garden and what to plant. The working part involves preparing the soil, fertilizing, planting, mulching and, harvesting.

Plan to grow what you and your family like to eat. While deciding what to grow, also consider how much you want to plant and the room the crops will need. You'll get better at this with experience. Be careful here. One of the most common mistakes is to create a garden that is too large. Start modestly until you see how much work is involved – then expand later.

An important factor to growing a great garden is soil preparation. Clear the garden area of all weeds and grass. This can be done by physically removing the unwanted vegetation or by spraying with a herbicide. When the weeds have been removed or are dead, turn the soil with a shovel or tiller to a depth of at least 8 inches.

Gardeners should consider having their soil tested. Call the LSU AgCenter extension office to determine the pH of their soil and calcium and magnesium levels. You may need to add lime to raise the pH of your soil and provide calcium (use dolomitic lime if the magnesium level is low). You'll also be informed of the levels of various important plant nutrients required for your crops.

Next, make raised rows by using shovels and/or hoes to pull soil up to create a raised area. Rows should be at least 36 inches wide from furrow to furrow and as long as you like. Wide rows will give you more planting surface and make more efficient use of your garden area. The bed may be as wide as you like, as long as you are able to comfortably reach the middle without stepping into it.

You may decide to build raised beds. Raised beds are usually easier to maintain and can be more productive than in-ground beds. Make them 8 to 12 inches high with sides constructed from your chosen materials, such as landscape timbers, bricks, cinder blocks or pressure-treated boards. The beds should be constructed 3 to 4 feet wide and as long as you like. Topsoil or garden soil mixes are generally used to fill new raised beds. The soil company or nursery can help you decide how much soil you need based on the dimensions of the beds.

By planting in raised rows or raised beds, you improve drainage. This is especially important because of the deluges we are subject to receive any season of the year.

Mulches are a critical part of vegetable gardening. Most important, they suppress the growth of weeds, but they also conserve soil moisture. Apply 1 to 2 inches of organic mulch (leaves, chopped leaves, pine straw, dried grass clippings) immediately over a prepared bed until you're ready to plant. Plant transplants directly through the mulch. Pull the mulch aside to plant seeds, and do not replace it over the area until the seedlings are big enough so they won't be covered.

Following these tips can make planting what vegetables you want to grow is almost as much fun as harvesting and eating your bounty.