

With spring 2017 now underway, I, like many others, am getting excited about gardening. Over the years, I have discovered that enthusiasm quickly fades, and sadly, what started out to be exciting and fun often becomes burdensome. Maybe my using the word fun in the previous sentence is stretching it a bit. If asked, most seasoned gardeners would say gardening is work — but a type of work they enjoy. If you have never grown vegetables and your enthusiasm is bubbling over to try it, allow me to share with you a few simple but essential tips on getting started. The goal is to keep the spark of enthusiasm alive. Perhaps these tips may even help the seasoned gardener maintain his or her gardening gusto.

First things first. When it comes to successful vegetable gardening, I recommend five basics. I call them ***The Five S's of Vegetable Gardening***. They are **SUNSHINE, SITE, SOIL, SIZE and SELECTION**.

Direct **SUNSHINE** and plenty of it is a major ingredient in growing quality vegetables. A minimum of eight hours exposure is fundamental. That is why selecting the garden **SITE** becomes critical. A south or southeast exposure is best. Select a garden site located away from trees and other obstructions where shade poses a problem. Providing easy access to water is extremely vital. Also, select a site close to the back door, so one can monitor the garden on a daily basis carefully scrutinizing it for needs or problems.

Having good **SOIL** saves many heartaches for the gardener. I recommend having the soil tested before beginning to garden. Ward Laboratories of Kearney is an excellent place to take one's soil sample. If in doubt, I suggest stopping there and asking how to take a proper soil sample for one's site. The ideal vegetable garden soil is slightly acidic. A pH that is slightly below seven provides greater nutrient values to the plants. Soil rich in organic matter that retains large amounts of water and provides high-quality air space is also recommended. This type of soil is usually crumbly and workable to a depth of ten-to-twelve inches.

SIZE does matter. Heed the old adage, "Don't bite off more than you can chew." Starting a vegetable garden that is too large and too difficult to maintain is a guarantee for crushed enthusiasm. Remember, I did say gardening involves work, but it can be enjoyable. In early spring, enthusiasm usually runs high. Most gardeners have little difficulty preparing the soil and planting. Such activity is usually fun. Then, as the season wanes and the summer heat arrives, regular maintenance for any garden, let alone an oversized garden, becomes a chore. Committing adequate time to weeding, watering, mulching, fertilizing, fighting diseases and insect pests and even harvesting becomes exhausting. Maintaining a smaller garden makes for a happier gardener.

Lastly, and just as important as the other basics, is **SELECTION**. I truly enjoy eating most vegetables, but trying to grow all of them would be overwhelming. If I were to try this, I literally would be biting off more than I could chew. I always encourage new gardeners to prioritize what veggies they favor and narrow the list to planting only a few—at least for the first year. Perhaps selecting varieties easy to grow is not a bad idea either. The fact is the more success we as gardeners achieve, the greater the chances we will continue gardening into the future.

I am always disappointed when I see in the early spring a beautiful vegetable garden that becomes nothing more than an ugly weed bed by mid-to-late summer. Whenever I see this, I generally surmise that somewhere down the line, a once enthusiastic gardener lost his or her enthusiasm. If you choose vegetable gardening this spring, I suggest you give ***The Five S's of Vegetable Gardening*** a try. Here's wishing you happy gardening!