

## Timely Tips for New Vegetable Gardeners

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The number of vegetable gardens planted in past years has increased. Here are some timely tips for new gardeners or reminders for experienced gardeners.

One key to growing quality vegetables is uniform growth. To help achieve this, keep soil uniformly moist. Do not allow vegetable gardens to dry completely between irrigation or rainfall. This leads to start and stop growth resulting in odd-shaped and bitter tasting vegetables.

Most crops need about one inch of water per week between rainfall and irrigation. If using sprinklers or overhead irrigation, water early in the morning. This is the most efficient time to irrigate as temperatures are cooler and wind velocity is lower.

Morning irrigation also allows sunlight to dry leaves quicker to reduce disease. Vegetables are susceptible to a number of leaf diseases. Most are fungal and require moisture on leaves for a set time before infection occurs. Watering early and locating gardens where there is good air circulation limits disease.

Mulching soil also reduces disease and conserves moisture. Many diseases are soil borne and splashed onto lower leaves during rain or sprinkler irrigation. This is why foliar diseases often move from the bottom of a plant upward. Mulch covers soil to prevent soil splash along with conserving moisture and reducing weeds.

Now that soils have warmed, it's time to apply mulch such as grass clippings, hay or wood chips. Know that hay or straw often contains weed or grain seed which become weeds in the garden. Wood chips work well but are slower to decompose. Grass clippings are abundant and often used as mulch but must be used correctly.

If herbicides have been applied to the lawn, read the label for directions. As a rule, avoid using clippings from lawns treated with herbicide on vegetable gardens. However, a label might state a recommended time to wait before using clippings as mulch.

Some herbicide labels will state clippings from a treated lawn should not be used as mulch at all. One example are products containing the active ingredient quinclorac. If nothing is stated on the label about grass clipping use, and you still want to use the clippings, a general rule is to wait until after the lawn has been mowed four times to use clippings as mulch.

When grass clippings are used as mulch, allow them to dry first. Fresh or wet grass clippings can mold and become matted so water and oxygen can't pass through. Apply grass clippings as a thin layer of about two inches to allow oxygen exchange. Soil oxygen is as important to uniform plant growth as soil moisture.

An often overlooked task by new gardeners is thinning of seedling plants. Check the plant tag or seed package. It will tell how far apart to thin seedlings after they are growing. If not thinned, plants will become overcrowded and will not grow or produce as well.

And of course weed control is needed or weeds will compete with vegetables for moisture and nutrients to reduce yield and quality. Mulching, hand pulling and hoeing once a week or more often is the best means of weed control in vegetable gardens. Don't hoe too deep so vegetable roots are injured.

As for fertilizer, a rule of thumb is to side dress plants about one month after planting. This means spreading fertilizer alongside a row or around hills and lightly scratching it into soil. Don't worry too much about the brand of fertilizer you buy; just read and follow the label rate. If too much nitrogen is applied, it will burn plant roots and slow growth.