

Vegetable Garden Tips

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The vegetable garden season will soon be winding down. Here are some fall tasks that will help next season's garden get off to a good start.

If you don't have this year's vegetable garden layout on paper, now is a good time to make a sketch to assist in planning next spring. This will help with crop rotation and remembering which varieties did well.

Rotating vegetables is a good way to reduce pest carry over from year to year and promote plant growth. Rotation means vegetables, and those from the same family, are not planted in the same garden area each year.

Planting the same crop, or related crops such as tomatoes, pepper, potatoes and eggplant or vine crops like melons, squash and cucumbers or cole crops such as broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower, in the same area each year leads to pest build-up, especially diseases.

If you have a large enough garden, a two- or three- year rotation would be best. Most home gardens are not large enough to do this and so at least a one-year rotation recommended.

Also, different vegetables have varying root depths and density and so extract different amounts of nutrients. As a rule, cool-season crops like cabbage, peas, lettuce and onions have sparse, shallow root systems and warm-season crops like tomatoes, peppers and melons have deeper and denser root systems. Rotating warm season crops with cool season crops benefits plant growth.

Take the time to sketch your garden layout on paper so you don't forget what was planted where. While at it, record which vegetables you had too much or too little of and the varieties that performed the best or the worst. Making notes on variety performance helps us select the best varieties to grow.

As harvest of a crop is completed or as plants die back, remove them from the garden if they had a disease to reduce carryover. Avoid adding these plants to home compost piles as most home composting does not reach high enough temperatures to kill pathogens.

Non-diseased plants could be left in the garden to till under later. Tilling or removal of plants in the fall removes overwintering protection for some insects. Always remove weeds before they go to seed and add to the soil weed seed bank.

Once the season wraps up, fall is a great time to amend garden soils. Make plans now for the source of amendment to use. Amendments include well-rotted manure, compost, leaves, and disease-free plant waste such as grass clippings.

Amending soils in fall is preferred over spring. It allows time for undecomposed plant material to decompose before spring planting. If manures are used, fall application decreases the risk of pathogens, like e. coli, that pose a food safety hazard. Fall tilled gardens also dry out and warm up faster in spring to allow for earlier planting.

If the amendment used is well-decomposed so there is not a lot of visible plant material in it, then spread a two to three-inch layer over the garden and roughly till it in six to eight inches deep. If the material is not decomposed, a smaller amount should be incorporated to ensure decomposition before spring.

If the garden is small enough, incorporate the amendment using a hand spade. If the garden is larger, a rototiller can be used but avoid over-tilling soil. This can damage soil structure and lead to soil compaction and drainage issues.

In fall, gardens should be roughly spaded or tilled. Freezing and thawing cycles over winter will further break down clods and mellow the soil for spring planting.