Growing a Vegetable Garden

There is almost no greater pleasure than harvesting vegetables from your own backyard. A home grown tomato always seems to taste better than the ones in the supermarket and even the kids will eat the things that they grow themselves without any complaints. Having a vegetable garden can provide wonderful flavours for the dinner plate as well as let the whole family experience the great joy of home harvesting.

Selecting a Site

Choose an open, sunny site, preferably north to north-east to catch morning sun and with at least five to six hours of direct sunlight per day. Shelter from winds may also be necessary so lattice, shade cloth walls and brush fences help and have the added bonus of being useful climbing vegetables.

Deciding on the Layout

The design and the layout depends on space availability and enthusiasm but for new gardeners it is sometimes better to look after a small garden well than to have a large garden which may get out of hand. Consider keeping the beds to about 150cm wide so that everything is in easy reach. To provide year-round vegetables for a family of four a home would need about six beds, each about nine metres by 150cm. This of course is not necessary for smaller selections of vegetables where families also buy from markets or supermarkets.

Formal designs can also be landscaping features. Planting vegetables in amongst other garden beds can help utilise space and also confuse the insects. Silverbeet, for example, is stunning when planted amongst perennials.

Selecting the Vegetables

Choose the vegetables that you and your family like. Choose those that give a high yield for the space that they use such as tomatoes and capsicum. For example, climbing beans, peas and cucumbers grow on trellis and use vertical space but very little soil space. Repeat harvest vegetables such as rhubarb, perpetual lettuce, silverbeet, mustards, bok choy and spinach are also very good value. Salad vegetables and leaf crops are excellent in the home garden to maintain the freshness and extra flavour lacking from those bought at the supermarkets.

Preparing the Site

Most of metropolitan Perth has sandy soils with poor levels of nutrients but these can be easily improved by adding moisture holding organic materials such as animal manures, mushroom compost and homemade compost and these will also encourage worms. Simply dig the organic matter through the top 20cm of the soil. Applications of wetting agents and water holding crystals are crucial in these types of soil for ensuring that the water that is applied stays where it is needed near the root ball.

Heavier soils also benefit from organic matter being added however the clay soils along Perth's rivers and the rocky outcrops in the Hills are very difficult and in these cases raised beds are sometimes the best option. Fill these with a good quality purchased soil.

Many vegetables can be grown easily and very successful in containers full of premium potting mixes. There is no need to mix in manures or any additives to these potting mixes and more often than not this will do more harm then good.

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Growing Vegetables

Planting Technique

Instead of planting all at once and having a glut of vegetables, consider smaller plantings every few weeks. Group vegetables that mature at roughly the same time and at the same height together to prevent shading and to free up the space for new crops once they've been harvested.

Tall vegetables should be planted at the southern end of the garden to avoid shading lower growing crops and plant perennial crops such as asparagus and rhubarb away from other faster growing vegetables so that they can continue to grow without their roots being disturbed when other vegetables are harvested or pulled out.

Some vegetables will require a trellis or stakes to climb on. These help to keep the vegetables off the ground and give even sunlight to all of the plants leaves. Seedling packets and labels will give a clear indication of the needs of each vegetable variety.

Watering and Mulching

Vegetables use water more easily when the soil is at or near field capacity meaning that sandy soils need more frequent watering then heavy soils. Sprinklers with a slow application rate and fine droplets are best for vegetables. Leaf vegetables can lose several times their weight in water each day so hand watering may be necessary on non-watering days. Soaker hoses can be very useful for slow watering and can be laid under mulch to prevent evaporation.

Garden compost, well-rotted animal manure and lupin mulch is the best mulch for vegetable gardens and should be topped up on a regular basis or dug into the soil when preparing for the next crop.

Fertilising

Leafy vegetables demand extra nitrogen in liquid form so liquid fertilisers should be applied every 10 to 14 days during the growing period. Root and bulb vegetables will produce a good crop without side dressings of additional fertilisers but fruit and seed vegetables benefit from side dressings of mixed fertiliser when flowering commences.

Applying a seaweed extract such as Seasol when planting seedlings and then fortnightly after that will promote vigorous growth and reduce stress and disease problems.

Problems

Insect and disease problems can be greatly reduced if the vegetable garden is kept weed free and the vegetables healthy and well fed. For specific insect and disease problems drop in to one of our stores with a sample or a photo of the problem that your vegetables have.

For great advice on garden products that will help promote a great harvest, please ask one of our team at any Better Pets and Gardens store.

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