



A FREE E-BOOK

How to Grow a Garden

27 Questions Answered

Planning, raised beds, seeds, watering, weeds, pests,
frost, harvest, canning, freezing, and storing,
plus a planting chart, a garden plan, and a diary page

by **Charlotte**

Vegetable-Gardening-Online.com

Welcome to Your Garden



Our grandchildren planting, and one of our family raised beds

Hello, and welcome! I learned to garden as a little child, working alongside my parents on our family farm in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. My family has gardened in this valley for generations, and I still love that first warm spring day when the soil is ready to plant.

Over the years, readers of Vegetable-Gardening-Online.com have written to me with the same questions again and again. This little book gathers the 27 questions I hear most, with short, practical answers from my own garden and many years of experience.

You don't need to read it in order. Find your question in the contents, read a page or two, and go plant something. At the back you'll find a planting chart, a free 4x8 garden plan, and a garden diary page to print.

This e-book is free. Please print it, keep it on your computer, and share copies with friends, family, garden clubs, and students. I only ask that you don't sell it or post it on another website.

Happy gardening,

Charlotte

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Planning Your Garden

1. When is the best time to plant a vegetable garden?



The answer depends on one date: your **average last spring frost**. Every planting time in the garden counts forward or backward from that day.

Cool-season crops: peas, lettuce, spinach, radishes, onions, potatoes, broccoli, and cabbage like cool weather. Plant them 2 to 6 weeks *before* your last frost.

Warm-season crops: tomatoes, peppers, beans, corn, cucumbers, squash, and pumpkins are killed by frost. Plant them 1 to 3 weeks *after* your last frost, once the soil has warmed.

In my garden: here in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, our average last frost is in early April, but a late frost can still come in early May. I plant peas and lettuce in March and wait until mid-May for tomatoes, when the nights stay above 50°F.

There is a second planting season, too. In midsummer you can sow fall crops like kale, carrots, lettuce, and spinach for harvests well into autumn.

More help: type in your zip code on our free [Zone Finder](#) to find your frost dates, or make a [Personalized Planting Calendar](#).

2. How can I plant a productive garden in a very small space?

A small garden can feed a family when you use four simple ideas.

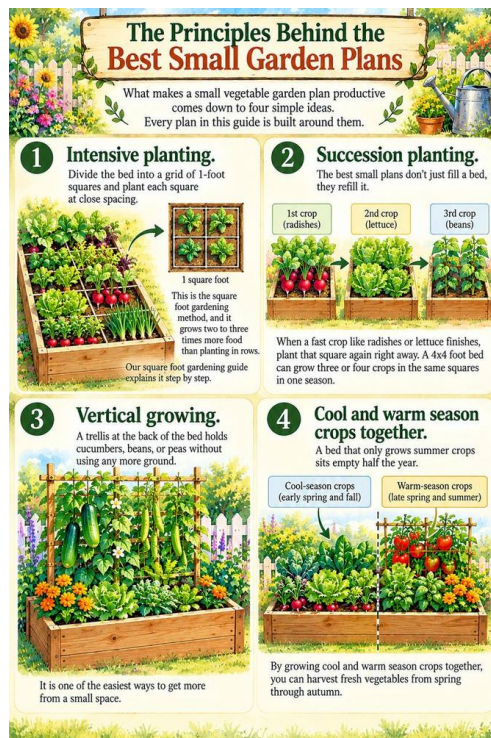
Plant closely. Divide the bed into 1-foot squares and fill each square at close spacing instead of in long rows. This is square foot gardening, and it can grow two to three times more food than rows.

Replant right away. When radishes or lettuce finish, plant that square again the same week. One 4x8 bed can grow three or four crops in a season.

Grow up. A trellis at the back of the bed holds cucumbers, pole beans, or peas without using more ground.

Mix the seasons. Plant cool-season and warm-season crops together so the bed is never empty from spring to fall.

More help: [8 Small Vegetable Garden Plans](#) and [Square Foot Gardening](#).



3. Can I really grow abundant vegetables in a container garden?

Yes. A sunny patio, deck, or balcony can grow a surprising amount of food. Containers warm up early in spring, and weeds are almost never a problem.

Go big. Small pots dry out in hours. Use at least a 5-gallon pot for one tomato or pepper, and a half barrel or 15 to 20-gallon pot for zucchini or a whole salad garden.

Use potting mix, not garden soil, which packs down hard in a pot. Every container needs drainage holes.

Water often. In summer, containers may need water every day. Push a finger into the mix; if it is dry an inch down, water until it runs out the bottom.

Feed regularly. Watering washes nutrients out, so give container plants a liquid organic fertilizer every two weeks.

Best choices: cherry tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, bush beans, herbs, and compact zucchini.



More help: [Container Vegetable Gardening](#).

4. Is there a way to plant a simple, easy-to-care-for garden?

Yes. The most common beginner mistake is starting too big. A weedy, thirsty garden in August is no fun.

Start with one bed. A single 4x8-foot raised bed, or a 10x10-foot plot, is plenty for the first year.

Grow what you like to eat, and choose easy crops: bush beans, zucchini, lettuce, radishes, cherry tomatoes, and herbs.

Mulch and use a soaker hose. These two things cut weeding and watering to a few minutes a week.

Visit every day, even for five minutes. Small problems are easy to fix when you catch them early.

The plan shown here fits spring, summer, and fall crops into one 4x8 bed.

More help: [How to Start a Vegetable Garden](#).



5. Can I plant my garden in a shady location?

It depends on how much shade. Count the hours of direct sun the spot gets on a summer day.

6 to 8 hours or more: you can grow anything, including tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers, beans, and corn. These fruiting crops need full sun.

4 to 6 hours: root crops like carrots, beets, radishes, and potatoes still do fairly well.

3 to 4 hours: leafy crops are your best choice: lettuce, spinach, kale, chard, and many herbs. In hot summers they even like a little afternoon shade.

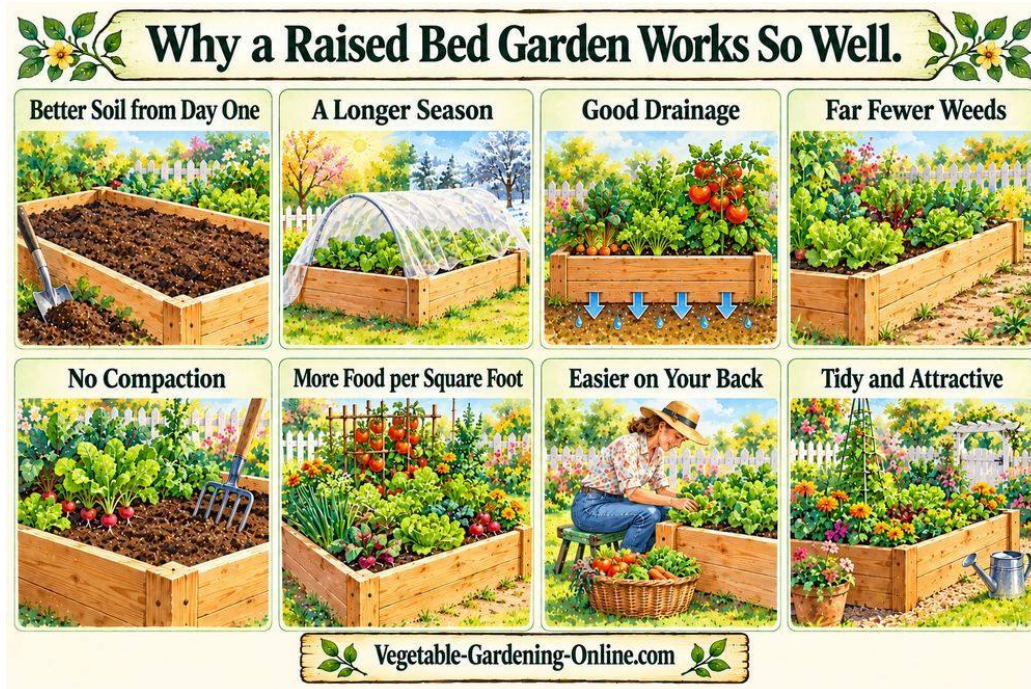
If your yard is shady, look for the sunniest corner, a sunny driveway edge, or a patio where containers can follow the sun.

More help: [Raised Bed Vegetable Garden](#) (choosing the best location).



Raised Bed Gardens

6. Does a raised bed garden really save time and effort?



Yes. That is why so many gardeners, our family included, love them.

Fewer weeds: you start with clean soil, and the bed is small enough to keep tidy.

Earlier planting: raised soil warms and drains faster in spring, which matters with heavy clay soil like ours in Oregon.

No compaction: you never step on the soil, so it stays loose, and roots grow deep.

Easier on your back and knees: the taller the bed, the less you bend.

More food per square foot: rich, loose soil lets you plant closer together.

7. Is there an easy way to build a raised bed garden?



You can build one in a weekend.

Size: make it no wider than 4 feet so you can reach the middle from either side, and about 12 inches deep. Length can be anything that fits your yard.

Materials: untreated cedar lasts many years. Concrete blocks, stone, galvanized steel, and composite lumber also work well.

Steps: clear the spot and mark the outline. Set the frame level. Cover the bottom with plain cardboard to smother grass and weeds. If gophers or moles live in your area, lay hardware cloth under the bed first.

Fill it: use a blend of good topsoil and compost, or a bagged raised bed mix. Water it well and let it settle for a few days before planting.

Our family built ours with the grandchildren, and it is still one of my favorite garden memories.

More help: [Raised Bed Vegetable Garden](#).

Seeds and Planting

8. Does it save time to start garden seeds indoors?



For some crops, yes. Starting seeds indoors gives slow growers a head start, so you harvest weeks sooner.

Start indoors: tomatoes (6 to 8 weeks before your last frost), peppers and eggplant (8 to 10 weeks), and broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower (5 to 7 weeks).

Sow right in the garden: beans, peas, corn, carrots, beets, radishes, squash, cucumbers, and pumpkins. They grow fast and many don't like being moved.

What you need: seed-starting mix, small pots or trays, and a bright light. A sunny window works, but a simple shop light hung 2 to 3 inches above the seedlings grows sturdier plants.

More help: [Vegetable Planting Calendar](#).

9. How deep should I plant my garden seeds?

The simple rule: plant a seed 2 to 3 times as deep as it is wide.

Big seeds like beans, peas, corn, and squash go about 1 inch deep.

Medium seeds like beets, chard, and radishes go about 1/2 inch deep.

Tiny seeds like carrots and lettuce go only 1/4 inch deep, or are pressed lightly onto the surface and barely covered.

Keep them moist. Seeds that dry out after they start to sprout will die. Water gently every day or two until the seedlings are up. A board laid over a row of carrot seeds keeps the soil damp; lift it as soon as you see green.

The seed packet always gives the best depth for that variety, so save your packets.

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VEGETABLE GARDEN SEED STARTING CHART

Start your seeds indoors, grow with love, and enjoy a bountiful harvest!

VEGETABLE	START SEEDS INDOORS	WEEKS BEFORE LAST FROST	GERMINATION DAYS	TRANSPLANT OUTDOORS	NOTES
Zucchini (Summer Squash)	Yes (or direct sow)	3-4 weeks	7-10 days	After last frost	Needs lots of space
Pumpkin	Yes (or direct sow)	3-4 weeks	7-10 days	After last frost	Vines need room to grow
Spinach	Yes	4-6 weeks	3-7 days	2-3 weeks before last frost	Cool weather crop
Kale	Yes	4-6 weeks	3-7 days	2-3 weeks before last frost	Very hardy
Cauliflower	Yes	6-8 weeks	5-10 days	2-3 weeks before last frost	Cool weather loving
Celery	Yes	10-12 weeks	14-21 days	After last frost	Needs patience and moisture
Leek	Yes	8-10 weeks	7-14 days	2-3 weeks before last frost	Gentle, steady growth
Onion	Yes	8-10 weeks	7-14 days	2-3 weeks before last frost	Sets plants 2-3" apart
Peas	No (direct sow)	-	7-14 days	2-4 weeks before last frost	Cool season favorite
Swiss Chard	Yes	4-6 weeks	7-10 days	2-3 weeks before last frost	Cut and come again!

QUICK GUIDE
Warm Season Crops (Tomato, Pepper, Eggplant, Cucumber, Zucchini, Pumpkin): Plant after last frost when soil is warm.
Cool Season Crops (Broccoli, Cabbage, Lettuce, Carrot, Peas, Spinach, Kale, Cauliflower): Plant before last frost for an early harvest.

Free printable from vegetable-gardening-online.com

10. How far apart should I space my vegetable plants?

Follow the seed packet for rows. In a raised bed, you can plant closer using 1-foot squares:

1 per square: tomato, pepper, broccoli, cabbage, eggplant.

4 per square: lettuce, chard, marigolds.

9 per square: bush beans, spinach, beets, onions.

16 per square: carrots and radishes.

Big plants: a zucchini or summer squash needs about 3x3 feet, and pumpkins need more. Corn grows best in a block at least 4 rows wide, so the wind can pollinate it.

Crowded plants compete for water and stay small, so thin seedlings to their final spacing while they are young.

The plan shown here is the free 4x8 planting plan from our website, square by square.



11. How should I handle transplanting seedlings?

Harden them off first. For 7 to 10 days, set seedlings outdoors in a sheltered spot for a few hours, a little longer each day. This toughens them up for sun and wind.

Pick a cloudy day or plant in the late afternoon, so the sun doesn't wilt them.

Water first. Water the seedlings an hour before planting, and dig the hole a little larger than the root ball.

Plant tomatoes deep. Bury tomatoes up to their top few leaves. They grow new roots all along the buried stem. Most other plants go in at the same depth they grew in the pot.

Water them in and keep the soil moist for the first week while the roots settle.



Everyday Garden Care

12. How often should I water my garden?



About 1 inch a week is the usual goal, from rain and watering together, and more in hot, windy weather.

Water deeply, less often. A long soak two or three times a week grows deep roots. A quick sprinkle every day keeps roots shallow, and plants wilt on hot afternoons.

Use the finger test. Push a finger 2 inches into the soil. If it is dry, it is time to water.

Raised beds and containers dry out faster than in-ground gardens, so check them more often in summer.

13. Is it best to water in the morning or at night?

Morning is best. Plants have water for the heat of the day, and any wet leaves dry quickly in the sun.

Evening is next best, as long as you water the soil, not the leaves. Leaves that stay wet all night invite mildew and blight, especially on tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers.

Avoid midday sprinklers on hot days, when much of the water evaporates before it reaches the roots.

14. Is there an easy way to get the watering done?

Yes. Stop dragging hoses and sprinklers around the yard.

Soaker hoses are porous hoses that seep water slowly into the soil. Snake one through each bed and leave it there all season.

Drip lines do the same job with small emitters at each plant.

Add a timer. A simple battery timer at the faucet waters for you early in the morning, even when you are away.

Cover them with mulch. The water goes straight to the roots, the leaves stay dry, and very little is lost to evaporation.

15. How can I make weeding easier?

Smother them before you plant. Lay cardboard under new beds and paths.

Mulch. A 2 to 3-inch layer of straw or shredded leaves blocks most weeds from sprouting.

Weed when they are tiny. A few minutes with a hoe once a week is far easier than an afternoon of pulling big weeds.

Pull after a rain, when roots slide out of damp soil.

Never let weeds go to seed. One weed can drop thousands of seeds for next year.

Plant closely. When vegetables cover the ground, weeds have no light to grow.



16. Is mulching worth the extra time and effort?

Absolutely. Mulch is one of the best time savers in the garden.

It saves water, keeps down weeds, keeps the soil cool in summer, and feeds the soil as it breaks down.

Good mulches: straw (not hay, which is full of seeds), shredded leaves, untreated grass clippings in thin layers, and wood chips for paths.

How much: spread 2 to 3 inches, keeping it an inch away from stems.

When: mulch cool-season crops right away. For tomatoes, peppers, and squash, wait until early summer, when the soil has warmed up.

17. How often should I fertilize my garden?

Start with the soil. Work 2 to 3 inches of compost into your beds every spring or fall. Healthy soil does most of the feeding for you.

At planting time, mix a balanced organic vegetable fertilizer into the soil, following the package amount.

Feed hungry crops again in midsummer: tomatoes when the first fruits form, corn when it is knee-high, and squash when it starts to vine.

Don't overdo it. Too much fertilizer, especially nitrogen, gives big green plants with very few vegetables.

Every few years, a soil test from your county Extension office tells you exactly what your soil needs.



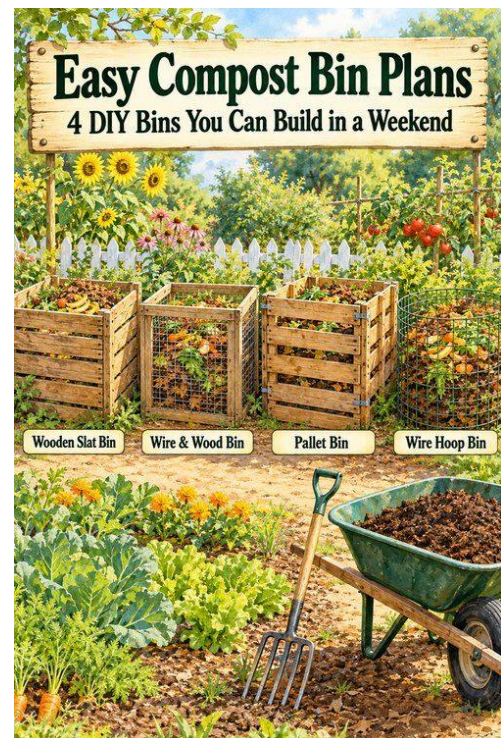
18. What type of fertilizer works best?

Compost first. It feeds plants slowly, holds water in sandy soil, and loosens heavy clay. You can make your own from leaves, grass clippings, and kitchen scraps.

Organic fertilizers such as aged manure, blood meal, bone meal, and fish emulsion feed the soil life as well as the plants, and they rarely burn roots.

The three numbers on a fertilizer bag are nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (N-P-K). Leafy crops like more nitrogen; tomatoes, peppers, and root crops like less nitrogen and more phosphorus and potassium.

More help: [Easy Compost Bin Plans](#) and [Vegetable Garden Fertilizer](#).



Solving Garden Problems

19. My tomatoes are big and bushy but don't produce much fruit. Why?



Too much nitrogen is the most common reason. Rich manure or lawn fertilizer grows leaves instead of tomatoes. Stop feeding, and next year use a fertilizer made for tomatoes.

Temperature: blossoms drop without setting fruit when nights fall below about 55°F or days climb above 90°F. Fruit sets again when the weather evens out.

Not enough sun: tomatoes need at least 6 to 8 hours of direct sun.

Help pollination: on calm days, give the plants or cages a gentle shake when they are in bloom.

Too crowded: give each plant room and good air flow. Pinching some side shoots on tall varieties helps the plant put its energy into fruit.

20. Can garden pests be controlled without chemical sprays?

Yes. These natural methods work well in a home garden.

Healthy plants first. Plants in good soil, with the right water, fight off pests much better.

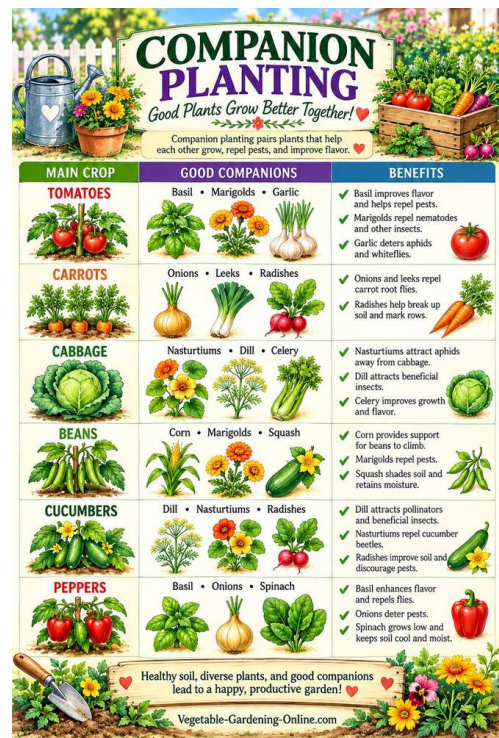
Invite the helpers. Marigolds, nasturtiums, sweet alyssum, and dill attract ladybugs and other insects that eat pests.

Hand-pick large pests like tomato hornworms and squash bugs, and knock aphids off with a strong spray of water.

Use row covers over cabbage, broccoli, and kale to keep out cabbage moths.

Slugs love our wet Oregon springs. Set out shallow traps of beer, or use an iron phosphate slug bait, which is safe around pets.

Rotate crops so pests that overwinter in the soil don't find the same food in the same place next year.



COMPANION PLANTING
Good Plants Grow Better Together!

Companion planting pairs plants that help each other grow, repel pests, and improve flavor.

MAIN CROP	GOOD COMPANIONS	BENEFITS
TOMATOES	Basil • Marigolds • Garlic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Basil improves flavor and helps repel pests.✓ Marigolds repel nematodes and other insects.✓ Garlic deters aphids and whiteflies.
CARROTS	Onions • Leeks • Radishes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Onions and leeks repel carrot root flies.✓ Radishes help break up soil and mark rows.
CABBAGE	Nasturtiums • Dill • Celery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Nasturtiums attract aphids away from cabbage.✓ Dill attracts beneficial insects.✓ Celery improves growth and flavor.
BEANS	Corn • Marigolds • Squash	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Corn provides support for beans to climb.✓ Marigolds repel pests.✓ Squash shades soil and retains moisture.
CUCUMBERS	Dill • Nasturtiums • Radishes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Dill attracts pollinators and beneficial insects.✓ Nasturtiums repel cucumber beetles.✓ Radishes improve soil and discourage pests.
PEPPERS	Basil • Onions • Spinach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Basil enhances flavor and repels flies.✓ Onions deter pests.✓ Spinach grows low and keeps soil cool and moist.

Healthy soil, diverse plants, and good companions lead to a happy, productive garden!

Vegetable-Gardening-Online.com

More help: [Companion Planting Chart](#).

21. How do I keep animal pests out of my garden?

Deer: only a tall fence works well, at least 7 to 8 feet high. Netting or two shorter fences set a few feet apart also keeps them out.

Rabbits: use a 2-foot chicken wire fence with the bottom 6 inches buried or bent outward along the ground.

Gophers and moles: lay hardware cloth under raised beds before you fill them. This is the surest protection there is.

Birds: cover berries and new seedlings with bird netting.

Squirrels and raccoons: cover ripening crops, pick on time, and keep the garden tidy so they have less to find.

A family dog that spends time in the yard also keeps many visitors away.



22. What do I do if a frost arrives after I've planted?



Watch the forecast in spring and fall. A clear, still night with a forecast low near 36°F can still bring frost.

Cover plants in the evening with old sheets, blankets, buckets, or garden row cover. Let the covers reach the ground to trap the soil's warmth. Avoid plastic touching the leaves.

Water the soil during the day before a frost. Moist soil holds more warmth.

Uncover in the morning once the frost has melted, so plants don't overheat.

Fall frost: pick tomatoes, peppers, squash, and beans before the first frost. Green tomatoes can ripen indoors. My husband's family in Russia picked every green tomato before the frost and laid them on newspaper to ripen, and we still do the same; we have fresh tomatoes until Christmas.

More help: [How to Ripen Green Tomatoes Indoors](#).

Harvesting and Keeping Your Vegetables

23. How do I know the best time to harvest my vegetables?



Pick often. Many plants keep producing only as long as you keep picking.

Beans: when pods are pencil-thick, before the seeds bulge. **Zucchini:** at 6 to 8 inches long.

Cucumbers: before they turn yellow.

Tomatoes: when fully colored and slightly soft. **Sweet corn:** when the silks turn brown and a kernel squirts milky juice.

Carrots: when the tops of the roots are about 3/4 inch across. **Onions:** when most of the tops fall over. **Potatoes:** two weeks after the vines die back.

Lettuce and greens: pick outer leaves in the cool of the morning, when they are crisp.

24. How do I store vegetables for winter use?



Potatoes: let them dry and cure for a week or two, then keep them in a cool, dark place at about 40 to 45°F. Don't wash them until you cook them, and don't keep them in the refrigerator.

Onions and garlic: cure in an airy, shady spot for 2 to 3 weeks, then store in a cool, dry place in mesh bags.

Winter squash and pumpkins: cure in a warm room for 10 days, then store at about 50 to 55°F.

Carrots and beets: store in the refrigerator, or in damp sand in a cool place. In mild winters like ours, you can also leave them in the ground under a thick layer of straw.

More help: [How to Grow Potatoes](#) and [How to Store Onions](#).

25. Is it safe to home-can extra vegetables?

Yes, when you follow tested methods. Home canning is safe and very rewarding, but it is not a place to guess.

Low-acid vegetables such as green beans, corn, carrots, and potatoes must be processed in a **pressure canner**. A boiling water bath does not get hot enough to make them safe.

High-acid foods such as fruit, jams, pickles, and tomatoes with added lemon juice or citric acid can be processed in a boiling water bath.

Always use a tested recipe from the USDA, the National Center for Home Food Preservation, or the Ball canning guides, and adjust the time for your altitude.

Label your jars with our free [Canning Jar Labels](#).



26. What's the best way to freeze extra vegetables?

Pick at their best and freeze the same day.

Blanch first. Most vegetables keep their color, flavor, and texture much better if you boil them briefly, then cool them in ice water. Green beans and broccoli take about 3 minutes; sliced carrots about 2.

Dry and freeze flat. Pat them dry, spread them on a tray to freeze, then pour them into freezer bags. They stay loose, so you can take out just what you need.



No blanching needed for peppers, onions, or herbs; just chop and freeze.

More help: [Preserving Garden Vegetables](#).

Your Garden Diary

27. Why will keeping a garden diary be worth the effort?

A garden diary is the best teacher you will ever have, because it is about your own garden.

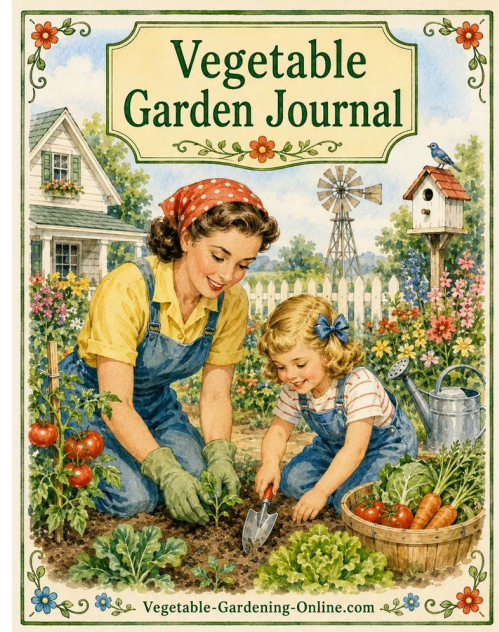
Write down: what you planted and when, the variety names, the weather, the first harvest of each crop, and the problems you had.

Next spring, you will know exactly when to plant, which tomatoes did best, and where you grew everything last year, so you can rotate crops.

Keep it simple. A few lines a week is plenty. Snap a photo now and then, too.

There is a diary page at the back of this book to get you started.

More help: our free [Vegetable Garden Journal](#) and [Vegetable Garden Worksheets](#).



Planting Chart

When to plant, counted from your **average last spring frost**. Find your frost date with our free [Zone Finder](#).

Vegetable	When to plant	How	Depth	Spacing
Peas	4-6 weeks before	Sow seeds	1 in	2 in
Spinach	4-6 weeks before	Sow seeds	1/2 in	4 in
Onion sets	4 weeks before	Plant sets	1 in	4 in
Radishes	4 weeks before	Sow seeds	1/2 in	2 in
Potatoes	2-4 weeks before	Plant seed potatoes	4 in	12 in
Lettuce	2-4 weeks before	Sow or transplant	1/4 in	8 in
Broccoli, cabbage	2-4 weeks before	Transplant	-	18 in
Beets	2-4 weeks before	Sow seeds	1/2 in	3 in
Carrots	2-3 weeks before	Sow seeds	1/4 in	2 in
Tomatoes	1-3 weeks after	Transplant	Deep	24-36 in
Bush beans	1-2 weeks after	Sow seeds	1 in	4 in
Sweet corn	1-2 weeks after	Sow seeds (in a block)	1 in	10 in
Peppers	2-3 weeks after	Transplant	-	18 in
Cucumbers	2 weeks after	Sow or transplant	1 in	12 in on a trellis
Zucchini, squash	2 weeks after	Sow or transplant	1 in	36 in
Pumpkins	2 weeks after	Sow seeds	1 in	48-60 in
Garlic	In fall (October)	Plant cloves	2 in	6 in

Spacing is for raised beds and closely planted gardens. In long rows, follow the seed packet.

Free 4x8 Raised Bed Garden Plan



Tall crops go on the north end so they don't shade the rest. See it larger on the [Raised Bed Vegetable Garden](#) page.

My Garden Diary

Date	What I planted or did	Weather	Notes and harvest

More Free Help from Vegetable-Gardening-Online.com

Free Garden Tools

[Zone Finder: your frost dates by zip code](#)
[What Can I Still Plant?](#)
[Personalized Vegetable Planting Calendar](#)
[Interactive Vegetable Garden Planner](#)

Free Garden Plans and Printables

[Free Vegetable Garden Plans](#)
[Small Vegetable Garden Plans](#)
[Vegetable Garden Worksheets](#)
[Vegetable Garden Journal](#)
[Free Printable Garden Calendar](#)
[Canning Jar Labels](#)
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Garden Guides

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[Raised Bed Vegetable Garden](#)
[Container Vegetable Gardening](#)
[Square Foot Gardening](#)
[Companion Planting Chart](#)
[Easy Compost Bin Plans](#)
[Preserving Garden Vegetables](#)

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