Preparing the Spring Vegetable Garden

By Kathy Jundt, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer

The very first step in preparation is to decide the type of garden you want. Hopefully you are reading this article in the fall or winter because the key word in the title is **preparation**! Without proper preparation, it is unlikely that your garden will produce abundant and healthy vegetables.

Your garden can be as elaborate or simple as you wish. You can plant a field, a raised bed or simply plant a container. If you consider the following factors and plan properly before you plant, the result will be a healthy garden full of delicious vegetables:

- **Size – Start small:** If this is your first vegetable garden it is best to experiment with a small, manageable size. To feed a family of four will require about 625 square feet. If you have less space you can still have a productive garden. You can maximize a small space by growing things like cucumbers and squash vertically.

- **Sun - The more the better:** Vegetables must receive at least 6 hours of sun and 8 to 10 hours is best for optimum growth. Some vegetables can tolerate more shade than others but the vast majority require full sun. Pick a space away from trees, shrubs and fences as in the summer they may shade your garden. Tree roots can also cause physical disturbances in your garden, and will out-compete your vegetables for soil moisture.

- **Location – Level, warm, and well drained:** Level spaces work better than a hillside. It is easier to plant, irrigate and keep the soil in place. Know where frost forms in your yard. Low areas are more likely to frost later in the spring. Pick an area with well draining soil. Standing water after rains means the area is too wet. Vegetables need good air circulation so pick an open area. Avoid areas where winds are very strong. You will also need a convenient water source. Hauling water to your garden is an option, but avoid it if you are able. The closer the space is to your house and kitchen, the more convenient it will be for you.

- **Soil:** Healthy vegetables need healthy soil with lots of organic matter. To thrive, vegetables require a PH of 6.0 to 6.5. One of the best things you can do to ensure success is to test your soil before you plant. The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture offer free soil testing kits to all North Carolina residents. You can pick up a kit from any local Extension Center. Once you receive the soil test results, you will know what to add to your soil to make it ideal for your vegetables. Your soil can be improved, but it takes time. Adding organic matter such as compost, manure or rotted leaves in the fall or spring can also be beneficial for improving soil quality.
**Raised beds** are an easy to manage option. They warm more quickly than the ground in the spring, require less weeding and water, and are especially good if the garden is to be in a newly constructed area that is likely to have heavily compacted soil.

Your raised bed can be any length, but 4 feet is the maximum width and less width is easier to reach across. You need to be able to access the middle of the bed comfortably for planting, weeding and harvesting. The bed should be 8 to 12 inches high. Pre-made beds can be ordered from many gardening sources or you can build them yourself from wood or stone. Do not use railroad ties treated with creosote. The creosote is toxic, leaches into the soil and gives off vapors for many years.

The existing soil in the raised bed can be “double dug”: remove the top six inches from one side of the bed to the other, using a spade. Mix organic matter in the excavated area. Return the soil to the top, mixing in organic matter, and then repeat the process on the other side. You can add soil from the areas around the bed or purchase additional soil.

**Container Gardening:** Almost any vegetable that will grow in a typical backyard garden will also grow in a pot. Potted vegetables have the same requirements as vegetables in the ground or a raised bed. They may require more frequent watering but they are an excellent choice for small spaces.

Vegetables which are do well in containers include tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, green onions, beans, lettuce, radishes and parsley. For vegetables such as tomatoes, a five gallon pot is best. Smaller pots work for herbs, onions and other small vegetables.

There are many choices for planters: whiskey barrels, plant pots, old buckets and just about any container that has good drainage. Nurseries carry potting soil that work well for containers or you can provide your own mix. Before potting, it is important to sterilize your container.

In summary, gardening is great fun, and a wonderful addition to our families food supply. The entire family can participate, and learn the lesson of how we feed our minds and bodies. Proper planning, as outlined above, can make the process less expensive and more successful.
Sources:

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North Carolina Master Gardener Training Manual