



Choosing a Home Garden Site

The ideal site for a home vegetable garden is one that receives full sun all day long, is blessed with deep, well-drained topsoil, protected from strong winds, free of rocks and perennial weeds and located close to the house. Of course, the ideal site is not always available. Finding an acceptable location may be more of a challenge for some gardeners than for others.

Close to home

A garden located near the house is much more likely to be well cared for than one tucked out of sight. It's much more convenient to tend to the important chores of watering, weeding, mulching and monitoring for pests or diseases when the garden is close to the house, water faucet and tool storage area.

Since vegetable gardens are particularly attractive to wildlife, such as birds, woodchucks, raccoons, and deer, a site close to the house is easier to protect than if the garden were located farther away.

Finally, locating the garden close to the kitchen offers the ultimate in fresh vegetables. Just set the table, put the pot on the stove to boil and dash to the garden to pick the corn or the beans.

Locate Where Vegetables Grow Best

Vegetables grow best where they receive the proper light, temperature, water and nutrients. When any one of these factors is limited the crop will also be limited in its growth and production.

Most vegetables need at least six to eight hours per day of full sun without shade from the nearby trees or buildings. Having light from morning sun is better than that receiving only afternoon sun. There is usually more moisture in the morning and this combination of light and moisture promotes better growth. If a shady site is the only choice, leafy crops and root crops will do better there than flowering and fruiting crops such as squash, cucumbers and tomatoes.

Most plants prefer warm soil and require good air circulation. Though gardeners cannot control outdoor temperature, they can manage low temperatures by selecting a site with a southern exposure. A dark, loamy soil enriched with plenty of organic matter warms up more rapidly and retains heat better than either sandy or heavy clay soils.

In hilly areas, the lowest point in the valley might have the best soil, but it will also be subject to the lowest temperatures since cold air is heavier than warm air and drains down into the valley on chilly nights. Heavy, wet soils tend to be colder than loamy, well drained soils.

Fertile soil is essential for a productive garden. Vegetable crops do not absorb nutrients well in either heavy clay soils or light, sandy soils. Poor soils can be improved greatly with regular cover-cropping, coupled with ample additions of compost and well-rotted animal manure.

Weeds

New Hampshire's worst perennial weed is *quackgrass* (often mistakenly called *witchgrass*). Quackgrass grows in most any disturbed soil, reproducing both by seeds and underground stems called *rhizomes*. Hand-pulling or hoeing quackgrass is a futile exercise since the rhizomes penetrate deeply into the soil; Light cultivations only tend to make the grass grow thicker, since each time a root is severed the plant quickly roots and sends forth new shoots at the site of the wound.

If the only possible site for a vegetable garden currently supports a heavy growth of quackgrass, kill the grass by spraying a post-emergent herbicide. Alternatively, till the plot and sow three crops of buck-wheat in succession, tilling each crop under when most of the plants are in full flower.

Other strategies for eradicating quackgrass: Till the area repeatedly throughout the summer or cover the area for an entire growing season with construction grade black plastic mulch.

...and rocks

The soils of New Hampshire's hillsides tend to be rocky and interrupted by a impermeable layer of densely packed clay or gravel called "hardpan." An abundance of rocks makes it difficult to till, plant and cultivate - and may make the carrots grow crooked. Hardpans prevent soils from draining well during periods of heavy rainfall and cause topsoil to dry out during periods of drought.

Last words

Growers can overcome the challenges posed by wet soil, droughty areas, rocky soils, hardpans, lack of sun - even lack of sufficient topsoil by selecting a sunny site and creating raised planting beds that elevate the planting zone several inches above the natural soil level, bringing in purchased topsoil and compost if necessary.

Locate for the future. Small gardens often develop into large enterprises. Avoid needless problems from the start and choose a site with room for expansion. Have fun!

Original fact sheet by Otho Wells, former UNH Extension Vegetable Specialist, edited & reformatted 11/00

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