

starting a
VEGETABLE
GARDEN

[practical advice]



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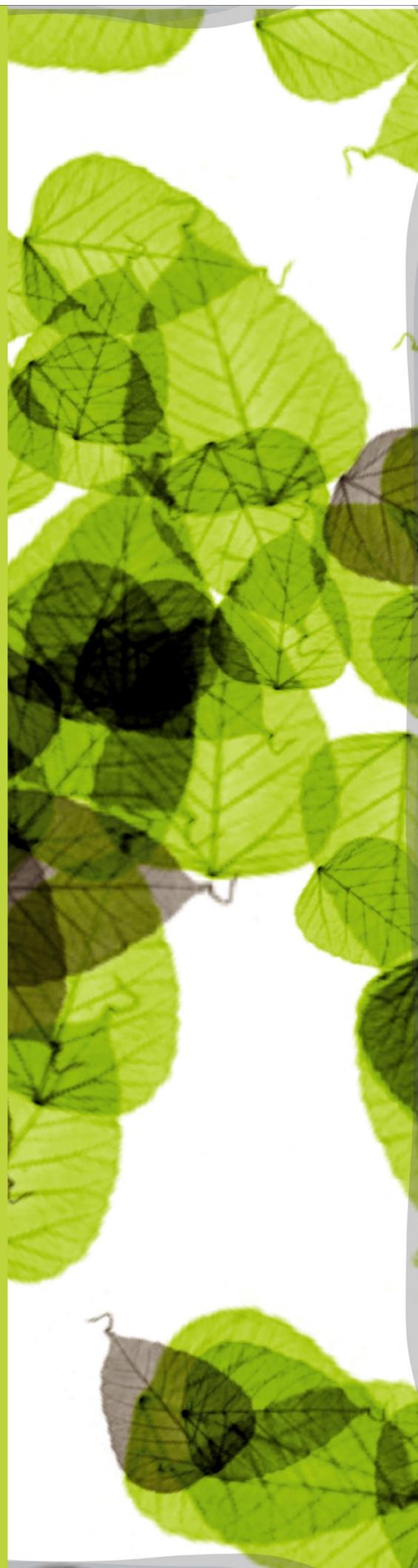


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1. Introduction

Just a few simple words of advice before you start:

- The most important thing that gardeners should realize is that every living thing has a prescribed life span. Sometimes plants die for no earthly reason whatsoever even though you've done everything "right," Don't obsess over it! Dig it up and plant another.
- Feed your soil, not the plant. The secret to a great garden is great soil. Try to add large amounts of organic materials like crushed leaves, grass clippings, and homemade compost. Your plants will never be happier.
- Don't obsess over something that doesn't turn out right! **Gardening is supposed to be fun!**



2. Area & Weather



Most vegetables like to grow in an area having **sunlight** for the most part of the day.

See the instructions on the back of the seed packets for when to sow which seeds, as some need to grow during Winter, while others grow during Summer.

It is best to start growing food early in the Spring. However, many vegetables will grow all year round, if the winters are frost free and not too cold. Keep planting all year long so something fresh and tasty is always ready to harvest.

3. Soil

Hint:

The condition of the soil is the most important aspect of a successful garden.

Soil should contain minerals, air, water, organic matter and inorganic material. The organic matter is the part that makes soil "live", providing nutrition / food for the plants. If soil is **too sandy**, it needs more organic material. If soil **sticks together** like clay, it needs more sand to be added.

The best soil has sand, clay and a mix of organic material. The more organic material in the soil, the better it will hold water.

Earthworms are good for soil, as they dig tunnels through the soil, making room for air and water. They also break down the organic matter into humus – containing nutrients for the plants.



4. Compost

Compost is the ultimate garden fertiliser as it contains the nutrients plants need, delivered in a slow-releasing method.

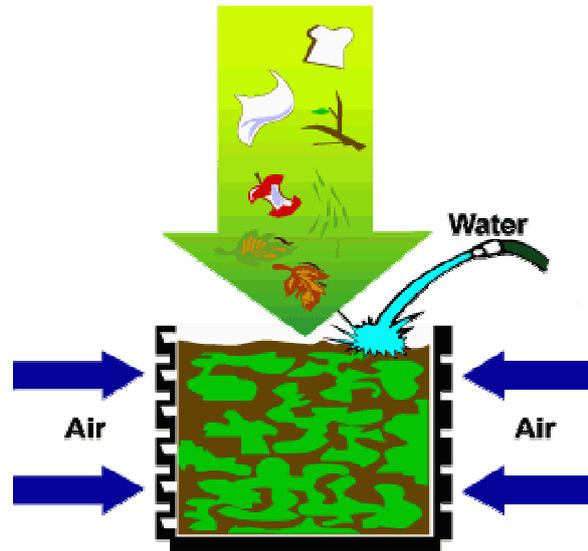
When you add compost to your soil it becomes a permanent part of the soil structure, helping feed your plants into the future.

Home compost can be used as:

- mulch - applied to the surface of the soil
- soil conditioner - mixed into the soil
- lawn conditioner - fine compost mixed with an equal amount of soil
- part of a seed and potting mix - mixed with soil

WHAT IS IN COMPOST?

1. Green materials
2. Brown materials
3. Water
4. Air

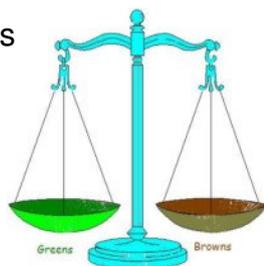


Greens

- Green materials contain nitrogen.
- Greens rot or break down quickly.
- Greens can become compacted.
- Greens keep the compost moist.
- Greens alone will make the compost slimy and smelly.

Green materials include:

- Fruit, vegetables and peelings
- Tea bags or leaves
- Coffee granules
- Crushed egg shells
- Garden & house plants
- Dead flowers
- Grass cuttings



Browns

- Brown materials contain carbon.
- Browns break down more slowly.
- Browns add texture and structure
- Browns create air pockets which are important for air circulation.
- Browns will be too dry on their own.

Brown materials include:

- Branches & twigs
- Feathers
- Shredded cardboard & paper
- Toilet paper tubes
- Cardboard egg cartons
- Straw & hay
- Wood chippings
- Sawdust
- Hair & Fur
- Vegetarian animals' manure
- Autumn leaves

Hint:

You need a balance of both green and brown materials in your compost bin.

DO NOT ADD...

- meat
- dairy products
- cat litter
- nappies / used tissue
- coloured or shiny paper
- weeds
- metal
- fish
- dog / cat faeces
- coal ash
- diseased plants
- plastic
- glass

HOW TO MAKE COMPOST?

There are many ways to make your own compost, of which we will discuss 2:

Method A: Separate composting in a heap to be added where needed in the garden

Method B: Direct composting into the garden where it will stay to be used

Method A: Compost Heap

Step 1: Select the type of composter you want

- You can create a pile of free standing material in your garden.
- You can dig a hole and leave it open or cover it with hessian.
- You can create an enclosed area either made of chicken wire, fencing, concrete blocks, or a wooden structure that will keep the pile neater.
- You can purchase a compost bin or wormery (there are a variety of types available from hardware stores or online).



Step 2: Select the space for your compost heap.

- Choose an area that is well drained area of bare earth (sand or grass) - not on paving or concrete. This makes it easier for worms and other creatures to get into your compost.
- Select a site that doesn't get too much wind, and that gets sun or semi-shade.

Step 3: Creating your compost heap

- Place a layer (about 15cm) of brown materials like branches and twigs at the bottom of your pile. (This will allow air to circulate at the bottom of the composter once more material is added.)
- Add more green and brown materials as they become available. Try to add equal amounts of green and brown materials. (Chop them up for faster decomposition)
- Add live earthworms if possible. The worms consume organic waste and produce compost.
- When adding more materials, check that it's not too wet or too dry.
- The more you attend to or manage your compost heap the quicker you will get usable garden compost.
- Organic waste needs air and water to decompose to form compost.
- Add air by turning your compost in the pile every week, using a garden fork or stick

- Check the moisture content. Keep the pile as moist as a wrung-out sponge. If it's dry and dusty add some water. If it feels slimy or soggy mix in some brown materials.
- Check the temperature inside the pile - by feeling it with your hand. If it is warm or hot, your compost heap is working. If not, add more greens.
- Finished compost will take between 4 weeks and 1 year, depending on how often you turn it and how well you maintain the moisture of the pile.

Step 4: Ready to use



- Healthy compost smells like soil. If your compost is smelly, that's a sign that it needs more air.
- When you want some compost, use the top uncomposted part to start a new compost heap, and use the bottom, composted part, in your garden.
- Your compost should be crumbly and dark brown when it is ready. Other than some twigs and eggshells, you shouldn't be

able to recognise the original materials

Method B: Directly into the Garden

Step 1: Clear the area where you want to create a planting space (your vegetable patch). Dig 30cm into the soil. Remove sticks, rocks and other objects that won't break down easily.



Step 2: Spread a layer of compostable scraps evenly over planting area. The smaller the pieces, the quicker they will compost. Get into the habit of cutting up larger pieces (for example, banana skins).

Step 3: Finish building your new bed. Add layers of used coffee grounds, shredded newspaper, wood chips, or shredded leaves. Top with a layer of topsoil.

Step 4: Water your new planting space immediately and then every day or two when dry. Watering frequently helps the compost and other material to break down more quickly. It may take a month before your bed is ready to plant but you will have rich, nutrient-loaded soil in which to plant.

Step 5: One month after you have added the last scraps to the bed, it will be ready for planting. Plant this bed and clear another bed to start the process over. This way, you will be continually renewing each bed as you go.

Step 6: Rotate your vegetable planting beds. Keep one bed unplanted and use that bed to regularly dig a hole and bury your compostable scraps. Move around the bed so that scraps are being added in a different place each time.

Note: Compost should not create an odour if you take care of it properly. Always bury the food waste by pulling aside some of the bedding, dumping the waste, and then cover it up with the bedding again. Bury successive loads in different locations in the bed.

5. Bed preparation

New beds should be prepared Properly!



Piling soil on top of your lawn or new vegetable beds **WILL NOT** kill weeds. They will thrive in the rich new soil.

Hint:

Be diligent in pulling and digging the area and amend the soil. The time spent building a good weed free soil base before planting will make the future tending of the bed much easier and satisfying.

You can choose to make Raised or Sunken beds:

a) Raised beds: (Above the ground)

- You don't *have* to have a side on your raised bed. Some folks just mound the soil up and use a hoe or rake to keep the edges relatively steep. This works best in places where flood action isn't likely to erode the beds with water running around them and there are not weeds or invasive grasses growing near the edge of the beds.
- Or else, you can build sides for you beds using wood, concrete, rocks, plastic; **Whatever you've got!** Use your imagination and what is available
- Fill the bed area with soil and compost.

b) Sunken Beds: (Below/level with the ground)

- Sunken beds can **maximize water use**. If you live in a hot, dry climate don't let the focus on reduced ground preparation distract from the advantages of a sunken bed.
- Though it is a lot of work to dig each sunken bed, screen out the weeds, and then add compost, etc. to the remaining soil, it is work that is only needed once per bed.
- The advantage of having a sunken bed that keeps water more easily combined with paths of undisturbed native soil can be well worth it.
- Dig up the soil about 40 cm deep. Remove all weeds, rocks, sticks.
- Add about 10 cm of compost and dig into the top layer.



6. Sowing seeds

Whether sowing seeds, or planting seedlings, the ultimate joy of growing your own vegetables are the same. Choose which ever method suits you best.

Buying and sowing seeds are a lot cheaper than buying seedlings, as you can get a lot more plants out of one packet, but the chances of growing all of the plants to maturity, are slim, as seeds need a little extra care to grow to seedlings.

Hint:

Soak seeds to get a jump on the season. Before germinating, seeds need to drink up moisture. Once they become plump and swollen, the little embryo inside will begin to grow.

Seeds such as broccoli and cabbage use moisture efficiently and germinate without pre-soaking. But slower-starting seeds benefit from pre-soaking. Dunk the seeds in room-temperature water for several hours or even overnight, but don't forget them and leave them in too long. Drain and plant the seeds immediately.

When sowing seeds, you can choose to sow them **directly** into the prepared beds, **or** into **seed trays**, to be transplanted later.

a) Direct sowing:

Step 1: Prepare the beds according to "Bed Preparation" in the previous chapter.

Step 2: Rake ground smooth and level so that water doesn't flow to low spots.



Step 3: Sow your seeds according to packet directions. Vegetable packets offer a "days to maturity" guideline to suggest when to sow your seeds.

Remember to label the beds with what vegetables were sowed where!

How deep do I sow my seeds?

I sow my seeds twice as deep as the seed's smallest dimension. If seeds are the size of dust, just pat them into the soil surface.

Step 4: Water in a manner that doesn't wash out the seeds or seedlings. Gentle dribbling. Keep moist throughout the germination period. Soil that looks and feels dry needs water.

Step 5: Start giving less water after germination (when the first leaves appear above the ground).

Step 6: Thin seedlings after first set of true leaves appear (second set of leaves). Transplant, give away, or compost excess seedlings.

b) Sowing in seeds trays:

By sowing seeds in seed trays, you can control the circumstances around your seeds a bit better while they are germinating. You can move the seed trays or containers to where it is sunny but sheltered, keep it indoors, or move it out of bad wind or weather.



You can use almost any container for a seed tray, from plant pots, to empty plastic containers.

Make sure the container has holes in the bottom for good drainage. The water must be able to flow out the bottom, else the seeds will rot.

The seed trays need to be filled with light soil.



How about TOILET PAPER ROLLS for seed trays?

Step 1: Cut toilet paper rolls in half & paper towel rolls into similar-sized sections.

Step 2: Stuff a bit of crumpled newspaper into one end of each tube section & set them upright, newspaper side down, snugly, in a watertight tray.

Step 3: Pack each with moist, sterile soil & plant your seeds.

Step 4: At planting time, you can either gently remove the newspaper & tube, or just leave it, & plant the entire tube in the ground. You can also leave some of the tube above ground to act as a cutworm collar.



Another innovative method, is to use EGG SHELLS as seed-starting pots:

Step 1: Crack the tips off eggshells, reserving the eggs for cooking.

Step 2: Fill shells with a light soil mixture and one or two seeds, and prick drainage holes in the bottom of each shell with a pin.

Step 3: Keep the growing medium evenly moist, but don't allow it to become waterlogged. Water with a misting spray bottle if you have one, set the eggs (in an egg carton) inside a seed flat or a shallow box, and place a thin pane of glass or clear plastic on top.

Step 4: Keep the box in a spot where you can have steady soil and air temperatures and light.

Step 5: Watch for the first set of true leaves (second pair of leaves). If two seedlings have appeared in your shell, gently remove the smaller one and either discard it or plant it in a container of its own.



Step 6: Transplant the seedlings to individual pots / your vegetable beds outside when you see two or three sets of leaves.

Just before transplanting, water the seedlings, then carefully squeeze the eggshells with your hand and set the seedlings into the holes in the ground (shells and all) at the depth they were growing in the shells.



Step 7: Firm the soil gently around the roots. Water softly but well.

7. Planting seedlings

Rather than direct sowing, start with large seedlings grown on the windowsill or purchased at a nursery for quick results especially in cold climates.

Buying seedlings (small plants) from a nursery, on the other hand, will work out a lot more expensive than buying seeds in packets, but require less care to mature.



Note that **not** all seedlings transplant well when older.

Cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, and are best started by **direct sowing** or from young seedlings planted carefully to minimize root disturbance.



Step 1: Draw a plan on paper of where you want to plant which vegetables, keeping in mind the full-grown size that the vegetables will reach (see packet)

Step 2: Dig holes wide and deep enough to cover the root system. Make sure holes are correctly spaced apart (see packet)

Step 3: Handle seedlings by the base of the stem, taking care not to bruise the stem.

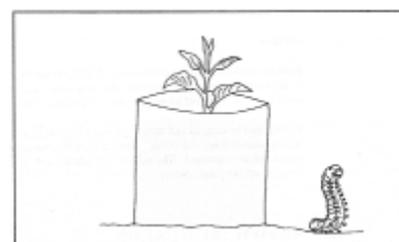
Step 4: Lay the roots straight down the hole. Do not bunch, spiral, double-over or bend roots. Plant long leggy vegetable seedlings deeper (up to the first set of leaves) for extra support, to provide a stronger start outdoors.

Step 5: Cover with soil. Do not bury seedling leaves, or leave any roots out in the air. Push down firmly to remove air pockets.

Hint:

Keep cutworms away from seedlings with the cardboard centers of toilet paper rolls. Cut the toilet rolls in half to form 2 shorter rolls to. Cutworms, creep along the soil, eating tender stem bases of young seedlings and cutting sprouts off at the roots.

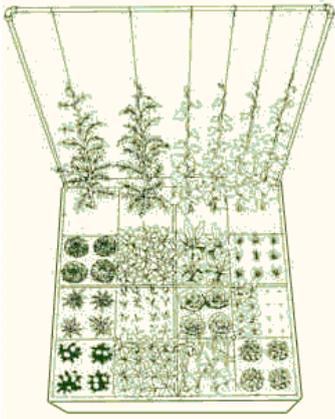
After planting, just set the cardboard tube around the seedling. Push the tube down so half is submerged, thus preventing underground attacks. Then once the seedling has grown into a plant, you can remove the cardboard collar.



8. Growing vertically

Plant vertically to save space. Instead of letting beans, peas, cucumbers, melons, and squash grow across the ground; you can let them climb a structure.

There are many ways that you can build your structure and you can use almost anything you want. Use your imagination and what is available to you. Here are a few examples:

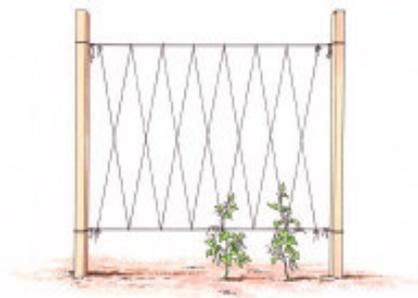
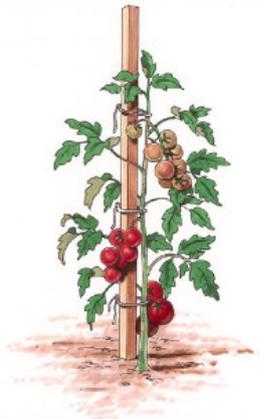


Trellis:

An upside-down U made from electrical conduit or other pipe works well and doesn't break the bank.

To support the individual plants, string is tied horizontally just above ground level and then vertically between the top bar and bottom string. Nylon is recommended to prevent rotting.

See other examples of structures below:



Twist the new longer vines around the string/wire regularly.

As your happy, healthy fruits and veggies get larger on their vertical vines, the bigger ones will need to be supported with slings made of panty hose or something similar that allows the produce to breathe while still being supported.

9. Mulching

Mulch's are organic material's that are layered on top of garden beds. This is good for your garden for many reasons:

- It helps to keep weeds from growing
- It keeps moisture in the soil for longer and protects it from drying out, lowering the amount of watering needed.
- Earthworms that live in the soil pull composted material into the ground and naturally feed your plant's roots.
- Mulches also protect the soil from temperature variations and help to protect the roots from extreme heat or cold.
- Another benefit is the mulch protects the soil from erosion and crusting over.

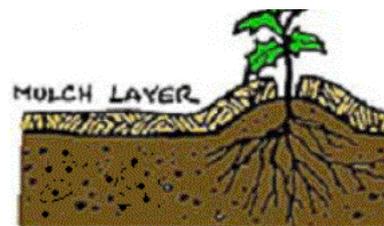


WHAT CAN I USE FOR MULCH?



- Bark chips or chunks
- Compost
- wood chips
- leaves
- grass clippings
- small stones
- straw

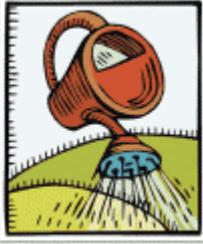
1. Spread the mulch over the ground around your plants.
2. Mulches on permanent beds just need to be "fluffed up" and refreshed/top dressed occasionally.
3. You need to keep the mulch away from the bases of tender young plants.



Hint:

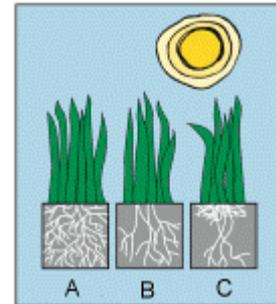
The mulch can be turned into the soil at the end of the season adding to the percentage of compost in the soil improving it's structure.

10. Watering



Water is vital from the moment seeds are sown through sprouting to the end of the growing season. It also dissolves fertilizers and carries nutrients to the different parts of the plant.

- How often you should water depends on how often it rains, how long your soil retains moisture, and how fast water evaporates in your climate. If there is no rain, twice a week should do, but check each day, to make sure the soil isn't dry.
- Water your garden either early in the morning or in the late afternoon. Don't water your garden during the heat of the day because the water evaporates faster and because the sun targets the water the plants can burn.
- Aerate the soil prior to watering. This is done by poking holes into the soil with a garden fork.
- Water as deep as possible, not just over the top. This will force the roots to grow deeper and make the plants stronger. (Image Right: A – Infrequent, deep watering; B – Frequent, deep watering; C – Frequent, shallow watering)
- Collect rainwater from your drainpipes and use it to water your garden.
- Wind will dry out the plants, as they lose a lot of moisture through their leaves. Try to build wind screens in areas of a lot of wind. More water evaporates when the temperature is high than when it's low.

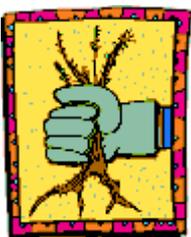


Hint:

Sometimes water is not what a wilting plant needs. When plants are growing fast, the leaves sometimes get ahead of the roots' ability to provide them with water. If the day is hot and the plants wilt in the afternoon, don't worry about them; they will regain their balance overnight. But if plants are wilting early in the morning, water them immediately.

11. Weeding

Simply put, a weed is a plant that grows where it is not supposed to. They steal light, water, and nutrients from the vegetables, and they shelter insects and disease.



Unfortunately all gardens need some maintenance. Cultivating, or weeding, is probably going to be **your most demanding** task as garden caretaker.

- Whether by hook, crook or hand those weeds have to come out of the garden bed and getting them out before they go to seed can make a world of difference.

- Weeds are both resilient and persistent. At times, you'll probably feel that if your vegetables grew as well and as fast as your weeds, gardening would be child's play.
- To successfully control the weeds in your garden, you have to learn to recognize them when they are young. It helps to understand how and when weeds grow to keep the garden clean and weed free. When weeds are small, regular cultivation will control them easily. If you let them become established, getting rid of weeds will be a struggle.
- Sometimes, although the weeds disappear, the seeds lie dormant in your soil through the summer. If these weeds are allowed to produce seeds, you'll have the same problem the following season.
- To help prevent weed germination, try to keep the garden covered with mulch. This isn't always practical when you're waiting for a row of vegetables to germinate, but it will help keep out many weeds.



- The best way to control weeds is to chop them off at ground level with a sharp hoe. If a weed is close to your vegetables, don't try to dig out the whole root system of the weed; you may also damage the root systems of neighbouring vegetables in the process. Instead, just remove the top of the weed. Persistent weeds may have to be cut down several times, but eventually they will die.

12. Pests

Pests are insects that come and eat / destroy / sicken your vegetables. Fungus is a sickness that grows on your plants, and causes spots.

We **DO NOT recommend using PESTICIDES** to kill these pests on your vegetables, for the following reasons:

1. Pesticides are poisons. The poison goes into the plant through its leaves, and is dangerous to eat, as it can make you sick
2. When you are trying to get rid of the "bad" pests, there are many good insects, such as lady bugs, bees and butterflies, which may be killed by poisons.
3. The poison will harm the environment (e.g. birds that eat the poisoned insects or plants in the area)
4. Poison is dangerous to handle, it must be handled with care, following the instructions and using proper protective clothing, else it could make you/your plants sick



ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS:



We would rather look at other, **cheaper, natural** and **safer** ways of dealing with pests. Here are a few suggestions and recipes for you to try:

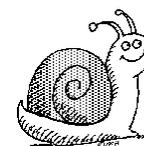
- A few drops of **dishwashing liquid** mixed with a litre of water can be sprayed on plants that have been attacked by aphids
- **Encourage ladybirds** - they eat aphids
- Caterpillar pest control: Hand picking for caterpillars is very effective. Just pluck them off and remove them from the garden.
- Lavender and lavender bags helps deter mice, ticks and moths and attracts butterflies.
- **Apple Cider Vinegar**: Use 1-2 tbs per gallon of water for a mild fungicide or acidic liquid fertilizer.
- **Mielie meal**: Use as a topdressing or in a tea for fungal control.



- **Garlic spray**: Garlic can be useful in controlling caterpillars and aphids. It is sometimes planted under fruit trees as a specific against curly leaf and black spot. Soak 1 bulb of finely chopped garlic in paraffin for 3 days. Dissolve 2 cups of soap flakes in 1 L of water and add to the garlic mixture. Stand the mixture for a further 2 days and then strain the mixture through pantyhose.

Dilute 1/2 a cup of the garlic concentrate with 4 L of water before application

- **Hot chilli peppers**: fresh or powder is great for repelling rabbits and other pests. Many soft body insects can be killed by its acidic "burning" effect. Best when mixed with garlic sprays applications.
- **Chilli Spray**: Chilli spray may be useful for the control of chewing insects and aphids when sprayed directly onto the insect. It may also be used to deter feeding predators. Chilli Spray Recipe: Blend 40 fresh chilli peppers in 1 L of water. Add 5 g of pure soap flakes to the blended chilli mixture. Apply as required undiluted
- To discourage soil borne pests from the cole family (cabbage, broccoli, etc), crush eggshells into the soil around the plants.
- **Bug juice**: Strained, ground-up bugs will make a spray to repel more of the same
- Getting rid of slugs/snails: Scattered crushed eggshells are a good deterrent for slugs, because they cut their bodies.
- **A permanent solution**: To rid the garden of slugs and other pests permanently, the fertility and drainage of the soil need to be improved. Pests thrive in poorly drained, infertile soil. Enrich the soil with plenty of compost.



13. Crop Rotation

Growing the same vegetables in the same spot each year can lead to problems. Soil living pests and diseases, which thrive on that particular crop, can build up in the soil.

Vegetables also have different mineral needs and continuous growing of one particular crop can lead to the levels of nutrients in the soil becoming unbalanced.

To prevent these problems, your crops need to be rotated. This will improve soil fertility, as different vegetables add and subtract different things in their growing cycle.

Simply put, don't grow the same type of vegetables in the same spot over and over again. Change leafy vegetables, root vegetables and bulb vegetables around each season / year.

Below is a practical example of crop rotation:

Basically you divide the growing area into four sections or beds. They would then be treated as follows:

The First Year:

Bed 'A'

Plant all the root crops in this bed. This includes Beetroot, Carrots, etc.

Bed 'B'

Plant all your Brassics, which include Cabbages, Broccoli, Cauliflowers etc.

Bed 'C'

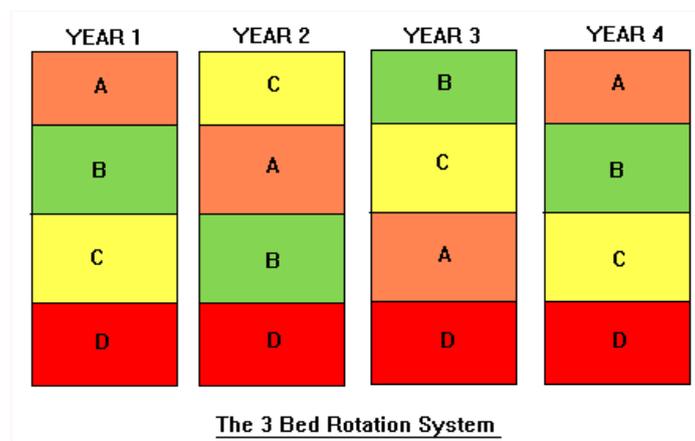
Dig as much manure or compost as you can into this bed. Here you will plant the very heavy feeders such Potatoes, Beans, Peas, Celery, Sweet Corn, Marrows, Spinach, Outdoor Tomatoes, Leeks and Cucumbers.

Bed 'D'

This bed will contain ALL your permanent crops. These will include Rhubarb, Strawberries, Raspberries, all fruit bushes and all fruit trees. Thoroughly prepare this bed before planting as it is not going to be rotated like the other 3 beds and is going to be there for a long time.

The Second and Third Years:

In the following years the system moves the beds along in rotation as follows: -



In the fourth year the system is back to where you began.

14. Grow An Avocado Tree!

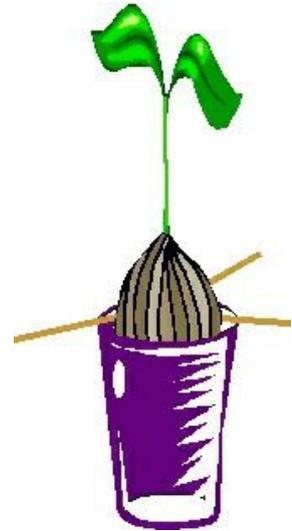
"HOW DO I DO IT?"

Step 1: Open the avocado and remove the pit from the center.

Step 2: Wash the avocado pit under cool running water, you don't need soap to clean it and then blot it dry with a paper towel.

Step 3: Carefully push three toothpicks into the thickest width of avocado, about 1 cm deep.

Step 4: Suspend the pit over a glass filled with water so that the toothpicks will rest on the rim of the glass. The water level in the glass should cover the fat base of the pit by about 2,5 cm depth. If the water is below that level you'll need to add some more.



Step 5: Place the glass in a bright windowsill. The more sun it gets the bigger it will grow. In about three to six weeks the top of the avocado pit will begin to split and a stem sprout will emerge from the top and roots will begin to grow at the base.

Step 6: When the stem grows to about 15-20 cm pinch out the top set of leaves. In another two or three weeks new leaves will sprout and there will be more roots.

Step 7: Planting the pit: Remove the toothpicks. Place composted soil in a large flowerpot. Make a small hole in the centre of the soil and place the pit, root-side down into the hole. The upper half of the pit should be above the soil line. Firm it into the soil by gently pushing the soil around the base of the pit.

Step 8: Water it generously so that the soil is thoroughly moist. Water slowly and gently so that it doesn't make holes in the soil. Keep your tree watered but don't let the soil be so moist that it ever looks like mud. If the leaves turn yellow it means that the plant is getting too much watering.

Step 9: When the stem grows another 25 cm, pinch out the top two sets of leaves. This will encourage the plant to grow side shoots and more leaves, making it bushy. Repeat this every 25cm it grows.

Step 10: Your tree can be planted outside in a composted bed in Spring / Summer

An avocado tree can grow about 10 m tall. With pruning it can be kept much shorter. Sometimes they will begin setting fruit after they are three or four years old.

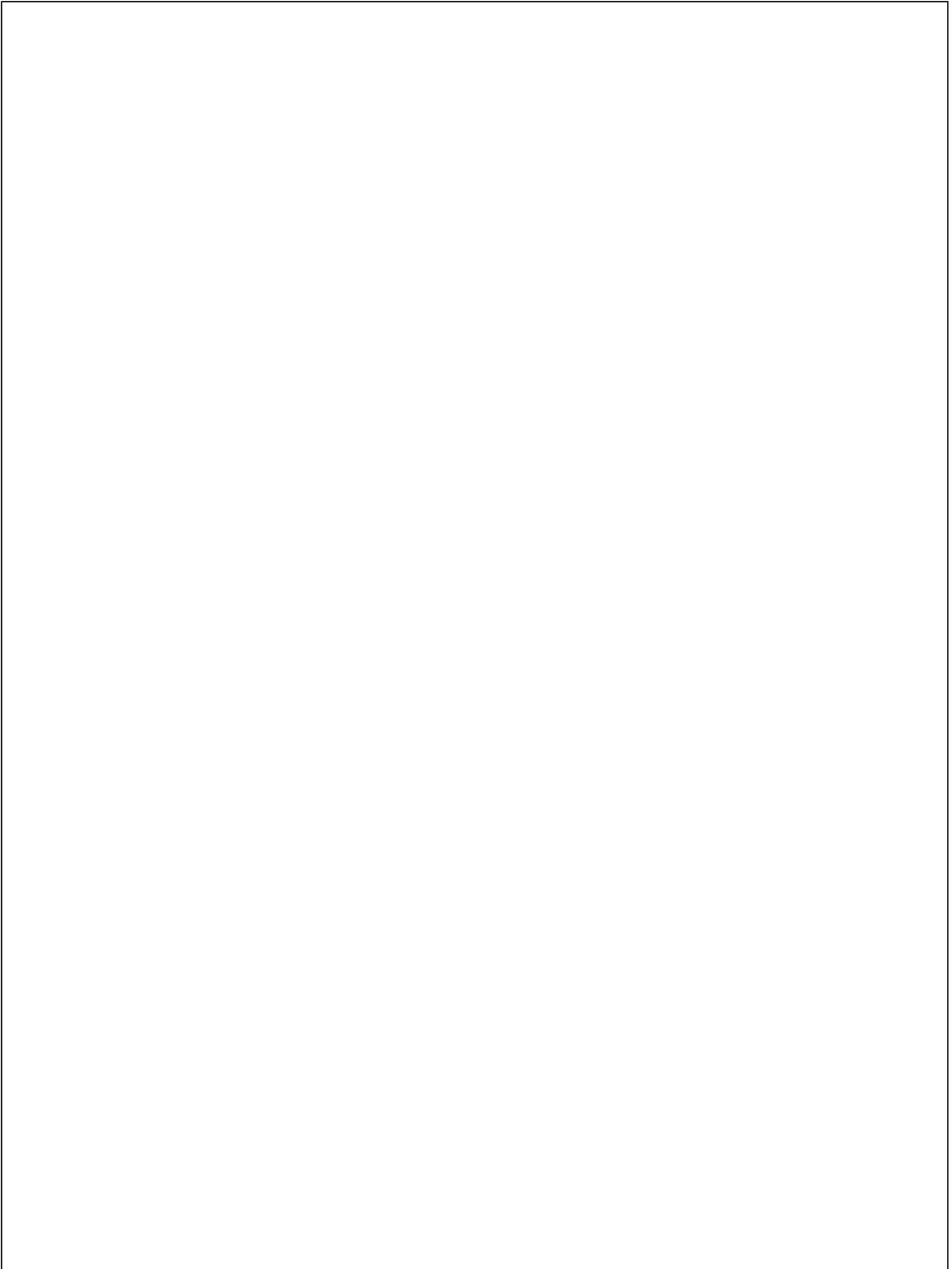
Avocado Nutrition Facts

Avocados contain just 5 grams of fat per serving;
NO cholesterol and NO sodium.

Avocados are high in fibre, vitamin B6, vitamin C, vitamin E, potassium and folate.

NOTES:

(Garden layout; vegetables; planting dates; general notes)



ENJOY YOUR VEGETABLE GARDEN...AND GOOD LUCK!



This booklet was compiled by Elsje Eloff for SOAPKidz.
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