Organic your Food Garden

with Jane Griffiths

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Jane Griffiths shares her tips for starting an organic vegetable garden this Winter.

It can be daunting growing your own food for the first time. Even if you have a large space with dreams of becoming self-sufficient, begin with one or two beds and learn how to manage those before expanding.

LOCATION

Vegetables need sun, ideally six to eight hours a day. Some need more than others – eggplants, tomatoes and chillies need far more than lettuces, rocket or spinach. The ideal location is north-facing, however an east- or west-facing vegetable garden will also do.

DESIGN

There are many design choices, from rambling wild cottage gardens to formal French potagers.

- Plan your garden on paper. Map the design to scale in the garden, using string and stakes to mark the beds and pathways.
- Beds should run north-south not east-west.
- On a slope, create terraces along the contours. This ensures surfaces are flat, so water, nutrients and seeds are evenly distributed.
- Maximise limited space by adding vertical structures and trellises.

HEALTHY SOIL = HEALTHY VEGETABLES = HEALTHY PEOPLE.

An organic vegetable garden begins with healthy soil full of humus. This broken-down organic matter is the life force of our soil because it:

- absorbs and retains water
- holds nutrients
- makes the soil moist, crumbly and aerated, providing the ideal home for billions of beneficial organisms. In humus-rich soil there is a dynamic thriving ecosystem of fungi, bacteria, algae, insects and worms. These are the workhorses of the soil, performing a multitude of beneficial functions.

The first step to achieving healthy soil is to always use an organic fertiliser or pesticide, as these support the intricate balance of soil life. The second step is to disturb the soil as little as possible.

In many gardens it is a tradition to dig up the soil regularly, beating clods with a fork to break them up before incorporating compost and manure. But digging is not only bad for our backs – it's harmful to the soil too because it:

- destroys beneficial organisms and upsets their balance
- causes precious moisture loss, meaning dissolved nutrients are also lost
- exposes buried weed seeds which then germinate

So stop digging every time you want to plant your veggie seeds/seedlings! The reason gardeners dig is to break up compacted soil. To prevent compaction, never stand on the soil. Our weight repeatedly pressing down leads to it being compacted.

The only time you really need to dig is to remove an unwanted deep-rooted plant, to harvest roots or when preparing a new bed.

PREPARING BEDS

Vegetables are hungry feeders and prefer rich fertile soil. When preparing new beds you should incorporate plenty of good quality, weed free, fertile compost and organic earthworm castings into the soil – which does mean digging. Once you've dug and prepared your beds, you never need to do it again. When digging new beds, be conscious of the soil layers so you don't upset the balance of organisms.

- Working in small sections, remove the topsoil layer and set aside.
- Dig a 60 cm deep trench.
- Loosen and aerate the subsoil layer by repeatedly throwing a fork into it and wiggling it.
- Add 20 - 30 cm of organic earthworm castings and compost.
- Mix in the lower layer of soil.
- Add the topsoil.
- Mix Talborne Organics Vita Grow 2:3:2(16) into the topsoil layer. This ensures that the roots of your young seedlings get all the phosphates and calcium's they need for a good start.

Bed preparation tips

- Make beds about 2 m x 1 m so you can reach the middle easily without standing on the soil. If beds are bigger, then place stepping stones in them.
- Create raised beds or edging around the beds, high enough to retain enriched soil inside the beds.
- Create pathways at least 90 cm wide for a wheelbarrow.
- If you plan to include an irrigation system, install it before you begin planting. Drip irrigation is the most water-wise efficient method of watering a vegetable garden.
- Mulch beds well to retain moisture, keep soil temperature even and reduce/prevent weeds sprouting from compost addition.

To maintain high humus levels, regularly add organic matter – compost, organic earthworm castings organic mulch –to the surface, about 5 cm deep. Nature is designed to incorporate this into the lower layers and in no time, it will be converted into fertile humus. **Every four months** fertilise with a slow release Talborne fertilizer (See fertilizer Chart below for guidelines for the types of veggies you are growing).

The less you dig your soil and apply compost and mulch, means fewer weeds, less maintenance, better water retention and more fertile soil.

HOW & WHEN TO USE VITA FERTILIZERS

Vita fertilizer is easy to apply and releases sustainably to feed crops over 4 months, which slots conveniently into most short crop cycles from planting to harvest. For longer term crops, apply a top dressing after 3 months to ensure continued cropping.

FLOWERING & FRUITING

Tomato, Brinjal, Pepper, Chilli, Pumpkin, Butternut, Squash

Need Phosphate and Calcium to grow strong roots and structure, Nitrogen and high Potassium levels to stimulate flower and fruit.

Plant with **VITA GROW 2:3:2(16)** @ 100g per square metre

Top dress before flowers develop with **VITA FRUIT & FLOWER 3:1:5 (18)** @ 100g per square metre

ROOTS & BULBS

Potato, Carrot, Sweet Potato, Onion, Garlic

Need good Phosphates to develop strong roots and bulbs.

Plant with **VITA GROW 2:3:2(16)** @ 100g per square metre

Top dress with **VITA GREEN 5:1:5 (16)** @ 100g per square metre

LEAFY GREENS

Spinach, Cabbage, Lettuce, Rocket, Kale, Herbs

Need Nitrogen and Potassium for green growth and strong cells.

Plant with **VITA VEG 6:3:4(16)** @ 100g per square metre

Top dress with **VITA VEG 6:3:4(16)** @ 100g per square metre

SEEDS, PODS, & LEGUMES

Peas, Beans, Mielies, Broad Beans

Need Phosphate and a little Nitrogen to grow sturdy plants, then Potassium to ensure many flower, pods and seeds.

Plant with **VITA GROW 2:3:2(16)** @ 100g per square metre

Top dress before flowers develop with **VITA FRUIT & FLOWER 3:1:5 (18)** @ 100g per square metre

Planting tips

- Begin with easy vegetables: lettuce, Swiss chard, rocket, radish, spring onion, beans, gem squash, cherry tomatoes and a selection of perennial and annual herbs.
- Plant a variety of vegetables and herbs in each bed.
- Plant vegetables close together, so when full size their leaves just touch one another.
- Include edible flowers (nasturtium, pansies, Californian poppies, calendula, cornflower) to attract beneficial insects and leave some vegetables and herbs to flower.

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