



Watch your garden grow

Dealing With Slopes

If your garden is located on a slope, you can use the same techniques farmers use on hilly fields to ensure good crops. Plant across the slope, not up and down the hill. This way, each row acts like a ridge (what farmers call contour planting) to trap rainfall. Contour planting prevents soil and plant nutrients from washing downhill. On long slopes, it's a good idea to leave strips of grass that also run perpendicular to the slope. This helps keep the rainwater and soil where they belong by forcing runoff to slow down and soak in. These grass strips should be wide enough to allow easy access to your plants and vegetables.

Many of us enjoy growing our own vegetables, fruits, flowers and herbs. By using the right gardening techniques, you, too, can produce plants to be proud of while preserving the soil and its fertility, enhancing the absorption of rainfall and protecting local bayous from sediments and chemicals.

To get the most out of your garden, it's important to pick the right spot for planting. Choose a sunny location with good natural drainage. Plant your garden on a fairly level site; avoid sloping areas and drainage channels that let topsoil wash away during heavy rains.

Enhancing Fertility

There are many ways to make a garden more productive, but meeting the nutrient needs of the plants in your particular plot is the most important consideration. Many garden soils can benefit from added organic matter and other nutrients. Composted vegetable scraps, grass cuttings and leaves are excellent sources of both, and the more that goes in your compost pile, the less that goes in the already crowded landfill. Mulching can also add nutrients, make the soil more workable, aid rainwater penetration and improve the moisture-retaining capacity of the soil near plant roots.

You also should mulch to minimize bare, exposed soil in your garden. Unprotected ground loses nutrients and needed topsoil much more quickly than planted soil. Bare soil places added stress on nearby plants by expanding temperature extremes and reducing available soil moisture. In addition to mulching, consider closer plantings of different, but compatible, plant species to make the most out of your working garden area.

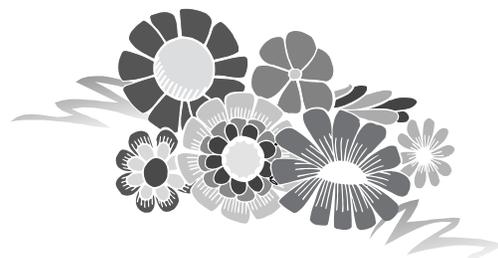
Winter cover crops are highly recommended for vegetable plots. The cover crop holds the soil during the winter and adds organic matter to the soil when it is turned under the following spring. You also can plant shrubs or small trees as windbreaks around the garden to control wind erosion in sandy areas and to further protect bare soil from exposure to the elements.

What to Do About Bugs

Your vegetable garden can suffer severe damage from insects and diseases. These preventive measures decrease the likelihood that serious problems will develop:

- Rotate crops so the same or a related crop does not occupy the same area every year. Repeated plantings encourage insect infestation and the buildup of soil diseases.
- Keep old sacks, baskets, decaying vegetables and other rubbish that may harbor insects and disease out of garden.
- Time plantings to avoid peak of insect infestations. For example, plant squash as early as possible to avoid borers that lay eggs in July. If you're going to plant a second squash crop, plant after mid-July to avoid the borers. Keep a record of the date insect problems occur for future reference.
- Inspect plants for egg clusters, bean beetles, caterpillars and other insects early each morning. Hand pick such pests and destroy them.
- Dislodge pests with a spray of water. This works with aphids, red spider mites and mealybugs.
- If you're having slug problems, place flat boards next to the plants. After the slugs crawl under the boards to escape sunlight, lift the boards and destroy the slugs.

Many products made to exterminate bugs and pests are toxic to humans, animals, aquatic organisms and plants. If you apply pesticides to plants properly, they can have little impact on the environment. If pesticides are found in our waters, it is probably caused by overuse or application at the wrong time. Please read pesticide labels carefully, and use alternatives whenever possible.



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