

THE “DIRT” OF VEGETABLE GARDENING

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There is a burgeoning interest in vegetable gardening for the urban setting. Perhaps this interest is driven by rising prices at the grocery store or a desire for better tasting, more nutritious, fresh vegetables. Whatever the reason for taking the challenge of raising vegetables, be aware that it will be a rewarding, challenging and at times, frustrating experience. However, when you bite into your product, all the challenges and frustrations will disappear into perfect delight!!! NOTHING tastes better than homegrown “veggies”!! NOTHING feels better than the satisfaction of growing vegetables!!



Spring is here and all of us are eager to “get to planting” whether it is vegetables or ornamentals. But before we do, there are some things that should be evaluated. The foundation of successful

gardening is the soil into which the seeds or transplants will be placed. A soil test is the first step in achieving good soil for a good result!! A soil test kit can be obtained from the nearest Texas AgriLife Extension Office and the results will be in your hands in about three weeks or less. The information obtained from this test will save you time and money!! You can now begin to properly prepare your vegetable garden soil for optimum production.

No doubt, the first step will be to amend the soil with organic matter such as compost. The more the merrier!! Compost will add nutrients to the soil and make the soil more



“workable”. For example, sandy soils leach water and fertilizer elements rapidly. Adding 4 to 6 inches of compost will make a huge difference in the quality of the sandy soil. Clay soils, on the other hand, will hold too much water but the answer is the same: compost, compost, compost!!! The compost will break down the density of the clay soil causing it to drain better. I have enjoyed success with mushroom compost although it is rather expensive in our area. Manures make good compost but be sure they are aged as fresh will be

too hot and will burn the plants. Commercially prepared and bagged compost are readily available at any gardening center. Another option is to make your own compost. This will take time however and will not be feasible if you are planning to plant a vegetable garden this spring. However, you can begin your compost pile and have it to add to your garden at a later date.

Do not expect to have great soil all at once. Building soil is an ongoing process and will continue to improve as you add more compost year after year. After about three years of “soil building” have your soil tested again to see the improvements.

Another way of dealing with poor soil is to use raised beds. They are easy to construct and work very well for a small garden in an urban setting. Almost any material can be used for a raised bed such as 2x12 boards, rocks, railroad ties or simple rows of mounded soil to elevate the bed 6 to 12 inches.



The soil mix used in the raised beds must be of good quality. Most local “dirt yards” have a good gardening soil mix of top soil/compost/ aggregate that will work well. Typically these mixes do not contain any mineral nutrition so you will need to add some fertilizer to increase productivity. Ask your soil supplier exactly what is in the soil you are purchasing so you can properly supplement as necessary.

Another consideration for your vegetable garden is site location. In the urban setting there is usually not a lot of choice since the site may be small. A sunny location receiving about 6 hours of sunshine is ideal for fruit-producing vegetables such as tomatoes, beans and peppers. Leaf and root crops can succeed in partial shade. In fact, in our intense Texas sun, late afternoon shade is good for all vegetables! Select a site with a water source nearby to alleviate dragging hoses or better yet, plan to utilize drip irrigation which will conserve water.

Once you have a suitable site and the foundation of good soil in your vegetable garden, you can plant the vegetables of your choice for healthy eating!!

This is the first article in a series containing helpful information for successful vegetable gardening.