

# How to Start a Garden

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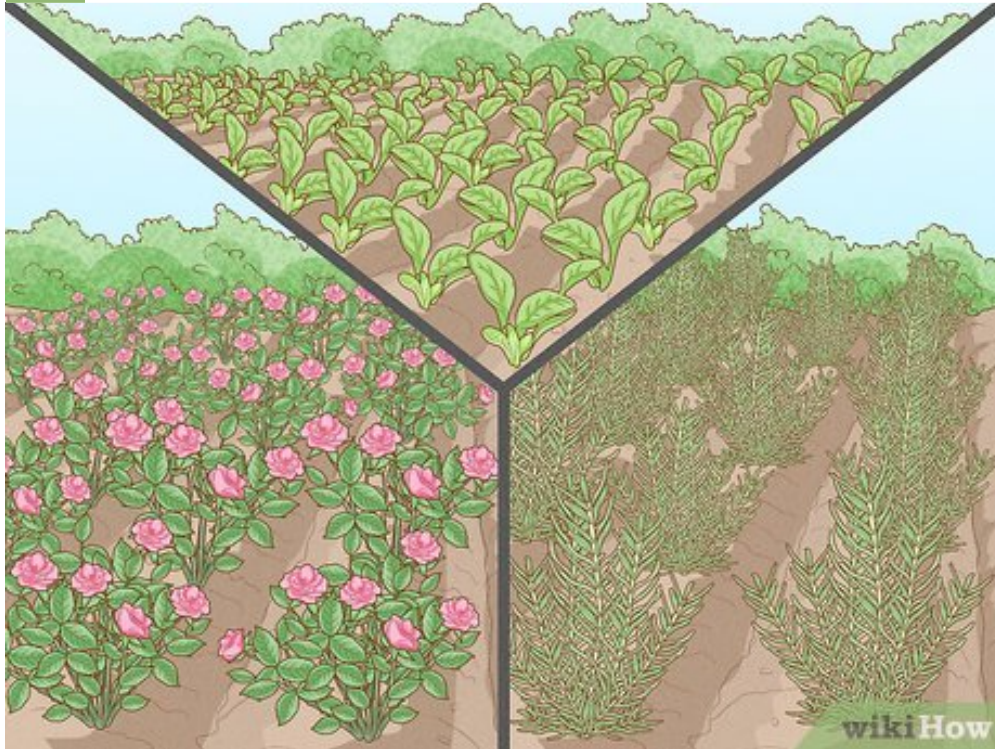
Co-authored by **Steve Masley** 🌱 and **28 contributors**

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Do you long to have garden-fresh vegetables on your plate every night, or to gaze out your window at rows of colorful flowers? No matter how large or small your yard might be, you can craft a garden plan to fit your needs. Read on for information on how to plan and start a garden.

## Things You'll Need

- ☐ Seeds or young plants
- ☐ Topsoil
- ☐ Compost or mulch
- ☐ Garden hose
- ☐ Tiller or garden rake
- ☐ Shovel
- ☐ Spade
- ☐ Fertilizer
- ☐ Fence materials
- ☐ Soil test kit
- ☐ Stirrup hoe



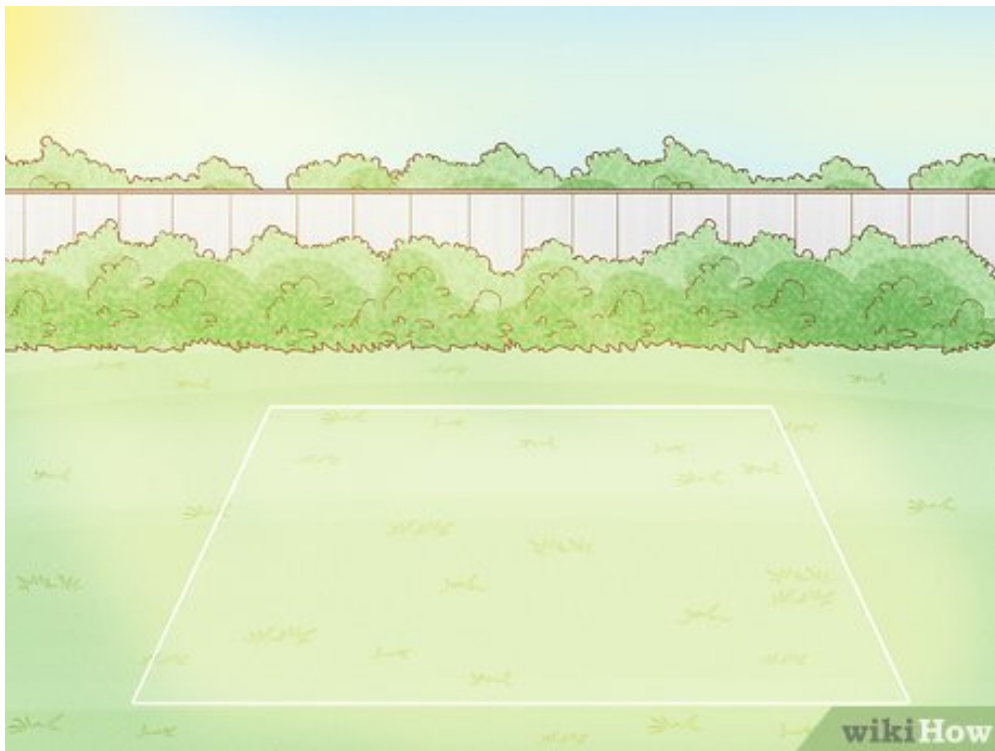
**1 Decide what type of garden to grow.** What purpose do you want your garden to serve? Some gardens are functional and produce fruit and vegetables you can use to feed your family or give away to neighbors. Others are more ornamental in purpose, serving to beautify your property and provide a pleasing sight to people passing by. [1] If you're not sure what type of garden you want, consider the following options:

- **Vegetable gardens** can include peppers, tomatoes, cabbages and lettuces, potatoes, squash, carrots, and many other vegetables. If vegetables can grow in your climate, you can find a way to grow them in your yard.
- In flower gardens, different types of flowers may be strategically planted so that something is in bloom almost all year long. Some flower gardens are structured with plantings in neat rows and patterns; others are wilder in appearance. Your personal style and yard size will determine what type of flower garden you might plant.
- **Herb gardens** often complement both flower and vegetable gardens, since they tend to bloom beautifully while serving the functional purpose of adding flavor to your food. Herb gardens might include rosemary, thyme, dill, cilantro and a variety of other herbs you may want to use to make dried spices and teas.
- In general, vegetable gardens require fertile soil and regular maintenance. Flowers and herbs can tolerate more neglect and poorer soil.



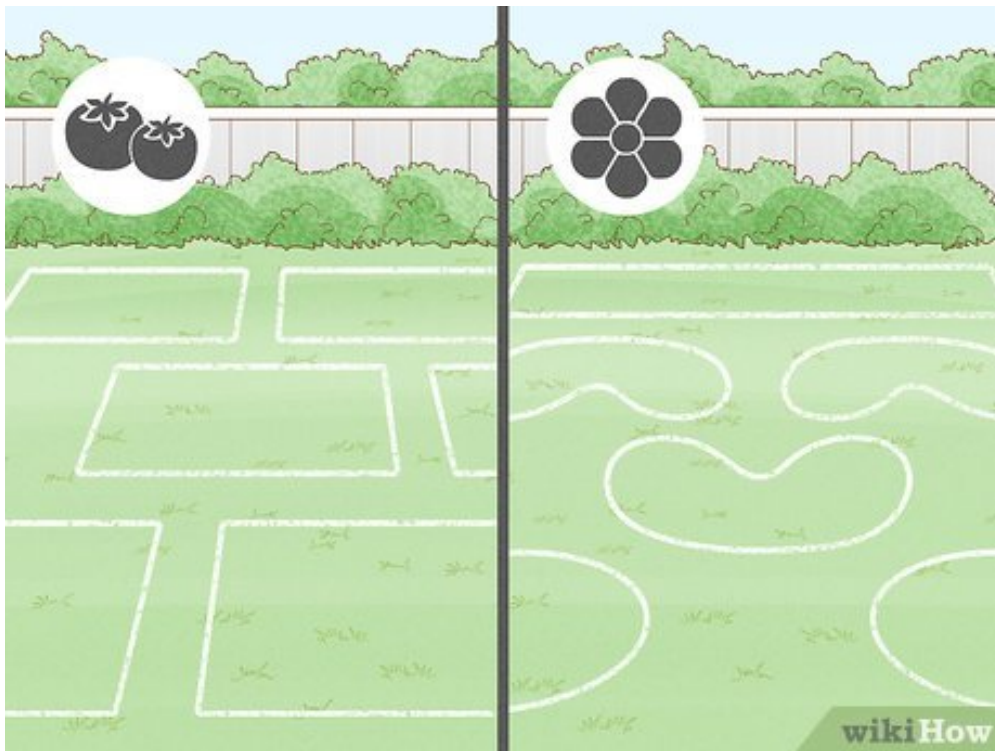
**2 Decide what specific plants to include in your garden.** Find out what grows well in your area by using this [zone finder](#) to determine what zone you are in. Then research which plants do well in your region. As you find out more about your options, make a list of the plants you want to buy and the best time of year to plant them. [2]

- Some plants don't grow well in certain zones. If you live in a place with mild winters and hot summers, you may have trouble growing plants that require a cold snap to grow properly.
- Unless you plan to make your garden relatively large, try to choose varieties that need similar growing conditions. Do they need the same soil type and sun exposure? If not, you may have to create a garden with several types of growing conditions, which can be challenging in a small garden.
- Visit a farmers market or plant sale in the spring. Often you can learn useful information from vendors and buy healthy plants that grow well in your area.



**3 Choose a spot for your garden.** Take a look around your yard to decide where you want the garden to be. The location you choose should help the garden serve its purpose while producing strong, healthy plants. [3]

- No matter what type of garden you're planting, most plants will grow better in rich, well-drained soil. Avoid spots in your yard where water seems to stand for awhile after a heavy rain, as this could indicate the soil there is too soggy or clay-based for healthy plant growth.
- Most vegetables grow best with a lot of sunlight, so if you're planting a vegetable garden, choose a spot that isn't shaded by trees, fences or buildings. Flowers are more versatile, and if you'd like a flower plot next to your house, you can choose flowers that grow best in partial or full shade.
- If your soil isn't especially fertile, you can **make a raised bed** or beds and grow flowers or vegetables there. Raised beds are planting beds that are built on top of the ground within wooden frames that are filled with enriched soil. [4]
- If you don't have a yard, you can still have a garden. Plant flowers, herbs and certain vegetables in large pots on your patio. You can move them around according to the amount of sun the plants need.



**4 Make a garden design.** Draw an outline of your garden or yard space. Map out different options where you want to plant various items in the location you chose. Tailor the design to fit the needs of your plants, making sure the ones that need shade will be planted in a shady spot and the ones that need full sun are in an area that isn't shaded during the day. [5]

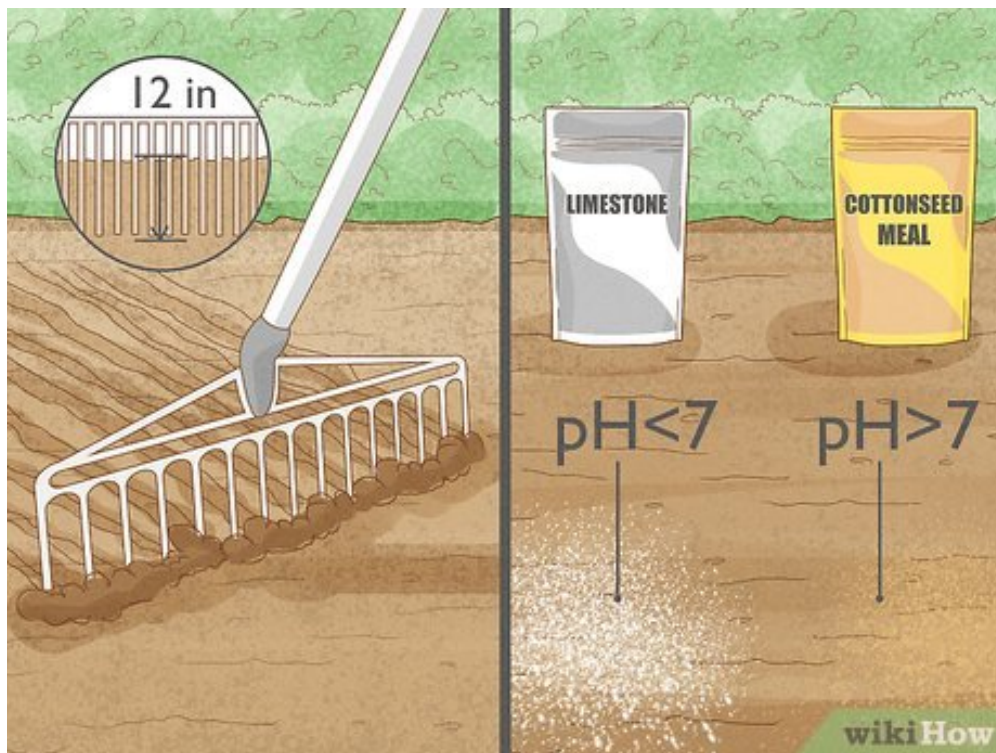
- Take into account the space each mature plant will need. Make sure everything you want to plant will fit in your garden and have enough space to spread out while leaving you room to move around between rows or beds.
- If you're planting a vegetable garden, design it so that it's convenient for you to walk into the garden and harvest vegetables as they ripen. You may want to make a path through the garden for this purpose.
- Flower gardens should be designed with aesthetics in mind. Choose colors that look pretty together, and make patterns that are pleasing to the eye. As you plan keep in mind when different varieties will begin to bloom.
- Take your lifestyle into account. Do you have children or pets who might run through the area? Is the garden within reach of your water hose? Is it too close to or too far from your home?





**1 Buy gardening supplies.** It takes a lot of equipment to plant and [maintain a garden](#), but once you buy most of the supplies they should last for years. You'll find the best selection at a home-and-garden store or a nursery. Gather the following supplies:

- Seeds or young plants. You can choose either to start your garden from seeds or buy young sprouted plants that already have a head start. Check the list of plants you intend to grow and buy as many seeds or young plants as you need for the different components of your garden.
- Fertilizer and/or topsoil. Bone meal, blood meal and other fertilizers help your plants grow healthy, and a layer of topsoil is useful to have in case you're planting something that needs extra protection.
- Compost. You can mix compost into the soil to improve its moisture retention and pH level and provide micro-nutrients. You can buy compost or [make your own](#).
- Mulch. Many plants would benefit from a layer of mulch -- leaves, grass clippings or other organic matter -- to protect them from inclement weather or extreme temperatures while they're in the early stages of growth. Mulch should be spread on top of the soil to help retain moisture and reduce weeds.
- Soil-tilling equipment. If you're planning to create a large garden, you might want to buy or rent a soil tiller, which is wheeled over the ground to break up the soil and turn it into a soft bed. For smaller areas, a stiff rake and hoe should be sufficient.
- A shovel and spade. These tools make it much easier to dig the proper-sized holes for seeds or young sprouts.
- A garden hose. Get a hose and a nozzle that allow you to either lightly mist or fully spray plants, depending on their size. If you are planting a large area, a sprinkler (and perhaps an automatic timer) will save you time.
- Fencing materials. If you're planting a vegetable garden, you may need to construct a fence around it to keep rabbits, squirrels, deer and neighborhood pets from feasting on ripe vegetables.



**2 Prepare the soil.** Use the soil tiller or garden rake to break up the soil in the area you mapped out for your garden. Work the soil to a depth of about 12 inches (30.5 cm), making sure it is loose and does not have large clumps. Remove rocks, roots, and other solid objects from the garden bed, then fertilize it and work in compost to prepare it for planting.

- How your plants grow depends on the quality of the soil. You can buy a soil-testing kit to determine how much organic matter and nutrients your soil has, as well as its pH level. Use the results to determine whether you should add more nutrients. Alternatively, you can take a soil sample to a local agricultural extension office for a free or low-cost soil test.
- If you're adding commercial fertilizer, don't add more than the manufacturer suggests. Over-fertilizing can be toxic to plants. Note that not all plants like extremely rich soil; some actually do better in poor soil, so remember to find out the soil preferences of the plants you choose. Do this with an online search for "garden soil requirements."
- If your soil test shows a pH level that is too acidic (lower than 7), add limestone to raise the pH. If your soil is alkaline (pH higher than 7), you can add cottonseed meal, sulfur, pine bark, compost, or pine needles to make it more acidic.

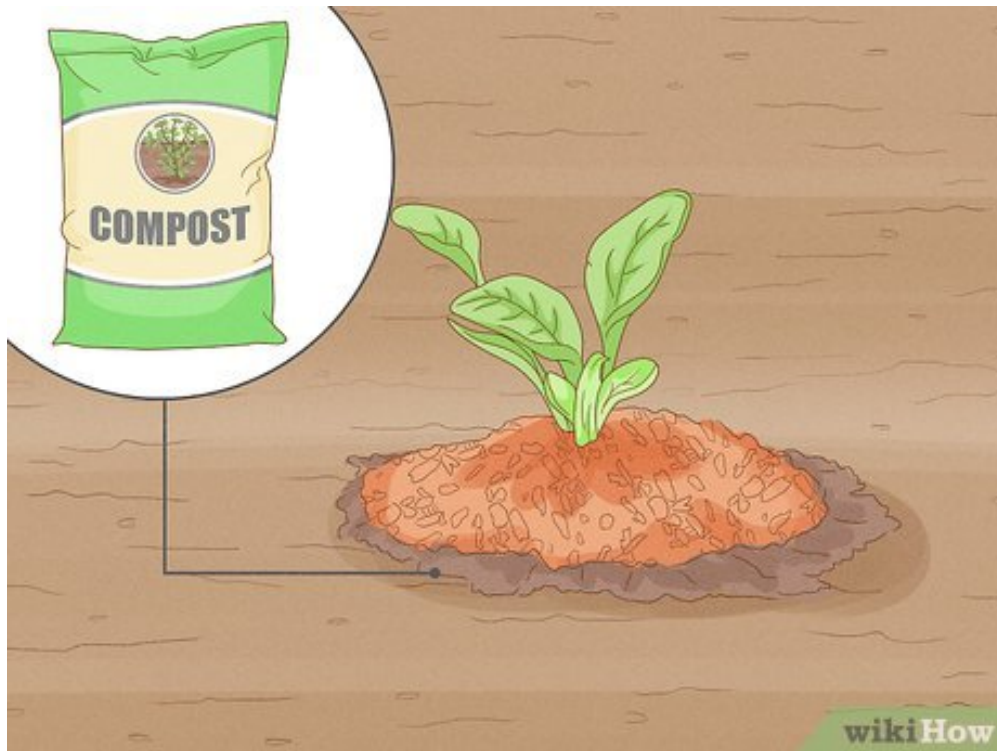


**1 Plant the seeds or young plants according to your design.** Use the spade to dig holes spaced a few inches apart, or as indicated on the packaging of the seeds or young plants you bought. Make sure the holes are as deep and wide as they need to be. Place the seeds or plants in the holes and cover them with soil. Pat the soil gently into place.<sup>[6]</sup>



**2 Fertilize as necessary.** Depending on the plants you choose to grow, you may need to fertilize the garden again after planting. Some plants may need more fertilizer than others, so make sure you use it only in the spots that require it.<sup>[7]</sup>





**3 Add compost, mulch or topsoil as necessary.** Some types of plants require a thin covering of compost, mulch or topsoil to protect them during seed germination and while the plant is young and fragile. Spread the material by hand, or use a soil spreader to cover a larger area.

- Some types of compost or mulch aren't appropriate for certain plants. Conduct research on the produce you're growing to make sure you use the right ground cover.
- Too thick a layer could inhibit growth, so make sure you add only as much as each type of plant needs.



**4 Water the garden.** When you're finished planting and treating the soil, use the garden-hose nozzle's "sprinkler" setting to dampen the garden thoroughly. Water the garden every day you don't get significant rain, adding more or less water to different areas according to the plants' needs for the first few weeks after planting.<sup>[8]</sup>

- Over-saturating the soil could drown the seeds and prevent the plants from growing. Don't water to the point where streams of water run through the garden.
- Never let the soil completely dry out. Watering once a day is sufficient.
- Once the plants have sprouted, water in the morning, rather than at night. Water sitting on the leaves and stems all night can lead to the production of mold and other plant diseases.
- After a few weeks, reduce how often you water the plants. Give the garden deep waterings two or three times a week or as needed.



**5 Weed the garden.** Sprouting weeds take nutrients from the soil, leaving less for your vegetables or flowers. Weed the garden every few days to make sure your plants get the nutrients they need. Be careful not to pull up sprouting garden plants.

- A stirrup hoe will help remove weeds before they get too big. You can pull the hoe along just below the soil surface between plants to take out the weeds.



**6 Consider erecting a fence.** If you see wild animals in or near your garden (especially deer or rabbits), you may want to erect a fence around the garden to protect it. A two- or three-foot fence should be high enough to keep small creatures out. If you have deer in your area, the fence may need to be as high as eight feet.



**7 Watch for signs of moles or gophers.** These critters can be an annoyance in a garden. See [Control Moles and Gophers](#) and related articles.



## Expert Q&A

### Question

**What month should you start a garden?**



**Steve Masley**  
Home & Garden  
Specialist  
Expert Answer

Take timing into account. Planting dates vary with climate zones. If you live in a region with mild winters and hot summers, for example, you'll be able to plant earlier in the year than you would if you lived in a region with cold winters and shorter summers.

Helpful 1 Not Helpful 0

### Question

**Is there any kind of DIY fertilizer?**



Community Answer

You can take your food scraps and start a compost pile in a large container, it will be great fertilizer. If you need something more quickly, ashes from burnt wood are high in phosphorous, and urine is high in nitrogen.

Helpful 24 Not Helpful 3



#### Question

### How do I keep my dog out of my garden?



Community Answer

The best way to keep your dog out of your garden is to mount a fence that's too tall for your dog to jump over. You could also tie your dog up outside using a leash that's an appropriate length to keep them from reaching your garden.

Helpful 16 Not Helpful 12

#### Question

### What is the best organic fertilizer that is prepared in home?



Community Answer

Raw food scraps. Dig a hole and bury them in the garden. They will break down faster. Sometimes I save my eggshells, orange peels, carrot peels, apple cores, and place them in the blender and grind them up for my soil in my garden. Then I just dig a hole and bury them.

Helpful 23 Not Helpful 4

#### Question

### How do I start a figurine garden?



**Book\_Dragon**  
Community Answer

Before you put any plants into your garden, plan out how many figurines you want, and where you want them. Put small stakes in the ground where you want each figurine. When choosing plants, try ones with small flowers that grow close to the ground. Ornamental trees are a nice touch. Do not choose sprawling plants. Use stones to block plants from intruding. Mosses help block other plants, and add a small "grass" that is very manageable and appealing.

Helpful 17 Not Helpful 7



## Tips

- To figure out how well your soil drains, use this simple test: Dig some holes that are about 1 foot (0.3 m). high and 2 feet (0.6 m). wide, and fill them with water. If they drain in 12 minutes or less, the soil drains very well and will dry out easily. If they take from 12 to 30 minutes, the soil has good drainage. If they take from 30 minutes to 4 hours, the area doesn't have great drainage but will work for plants that like moist soil. If they take even longer to drain, you probably won't be able to plant things until you fix the soil by adding organic matter.
- If you live in an area with cool springs and/or dense soil, here's a way to get your seeds to germinate and grow sooner: Dampen them between two layers of paper towels. They will germinate in a few days. Then carefully place them in your garden soil at a depth and spacing recommended on the seed packet. Gently cover the seedlings with compost. They should appear above-ground in just a few days. This

technique works especially well if you learn to distinguish the roots of the seedling from its stem or stalk and place the germinated seedling in the soil with the stem facing up toward the sky and the roots facing down. This technique also benefits from very gentle handling.

- If you don't use a soil test, you may still be able to get some information about the soil by observing the weeds that are growing there. Dandelions prefer very fertile soil. If there aren't many weeds growing, the dirt is probably not very fertile. If the weeds look unhealthy, the soil there may have a nutrient deficiency. Crabgrass, plantains, sheep sorrel, and horsetails prefer acidic soil, while chamomile and goose foot like alkaline soil.



## Warnings

- Be sure to water your garden if it feels or looks dry. Don't let the plants wilt, but don't over-water either. Plants need oxygenated soil, but over-watering inhibits oxygenation. Most plants do well with about an inch of water per week.

## References

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## About This Article



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This article was co-authored by [Steve Masley](#). Steve Masley has been designing and maintaining organic vegetable gardens in the San Francisco Bay Area for over 30 years. He is an Organic Gardening Consultant and Founder of Grow-It-Organically, a website that teaches clients and students the ins and outs of organic vegetable gardening. In 2007 and 2008, Steve taught the Local Sustainable Agriculture Field Practicum at Stanford University. This article has been viewed 154,186 times.

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11 votes - 73%

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