

SQUARE FOOT VEGETABLE GARDENING - IN EDGEBROOK

POINTERS and SUGGESTIONS FROM Neighborhood growers

There is nothing like a freshly picked tomato, cucumber, or lettuce to make your salads “sing” in the summer!! NOW is a great time to start planning and creating a garden for your family meals. A few members of our community have been managing their vegetable gardens for years and have learned a few tricks along the way that they would like to share with the rest of us.

First, every vegetable garden has 4 key requirements:

- SUN! -at least 6 hours of direct sun light is key. Location can significantly increase your output!
- Great soil - amendments (including coffee grounds, kitchen plant waste and ground leaves in the fall, can make your soil healthy and productive). Cotton burr compost can really help keep the weeds down and condition the soil.
- Consistent watering - all plants need water, particularly your vegetables, to flourish and produce a bumper crop.
- Regular weeding and fertilization.

But that is just the start.

BEDS

With our limited space, gardeners in our area have had success with the book - Square Foot Gardening. The library has a number of Square Foot Gardening books that can help guide you through your first years in gardening.

A Square Foot garden consists of 4'x4' or 4'x8' raised beds (see photo), purchased as a kit or made from scratch. The better the materials the longer beds will last. A single 4'x4' bed can contain 4 Indeterminate (vining tomatoes), 8 peppers, 4 bibb Lettuce, 4 romaine Lettuce, 4 buttercrunch lettuce and up to 36 green onions. Imagine the size of your garden with multiple beds! A local gardener has five 4'x8', one 5'x5', one 1'x5' and 6 pots for herbs, and is not organic. The beds are 8" deep and placed 2' apart. He stated that “ If I could have one do over, the beds would be 2" deeper with 3' aisles between beds”. Remember, for deeper beds, additional soil is needed. For example, an additional 2" would require an additional 37 cu. ft. of soil. You can also gain added depth by digging out 2" of the dirt under the beds. Consider using larger boards as it makes it easier to access the garden when doing maintenance.



SOIL

The first decision is whether to be organic or not. That decision determines the nutrients and fertilizers you add to your soil initially and throughout the growing season. Be sure to amend the beds annually. You have a choice for filling the beds. The most expensive method is purchasing blended soil for Square Foot gardens. Mixing your own will save money but increase your time requirement. The mixing formula can be found in the mentioned publications. The original investment is not small, but it will last for a long time. My beds required replacing a few boards in 2019 and 2020, after over 30 years of use.

TOOLS

- Shovel for turning soil (Rent or purchase a **small** rototiller. Try rentals at Ace Hardware.)
- Garden rake for smoothing the soil after turning
- Three prong garden rake for loosening the soil, controlling weeds and to work fertilizer into soil around plants
- Trowel for digging holes and trenches for planting
- Snipper- for removing unwanted Indeterminate tomato vines (suckers) and keeping plants neat
- Cups and measuring spoons for applying fertilizer/nutrients

PLANNING - PLANTING

Winter is the time to PLAN a garden. Determine the number of beds, plants vs seeds, what vegetables to grow, the variety of the vegetable selected and its compatibility with other vegetables. The basic premise in Square Foot gardening is “Up verse Out”. This premise dictates that plants like indeterminate (vining) tomatoes, cucumbers, peas require a vertical cage. Cages and stakes can be purchased, or you can build a trellis using cattle fencing. It will be cheaper than buying cages and better than using stakes. In a 4’ x 8’ bed, you can plant 16 heirloom tomatoes (Indeterminate), along with four rows of carrots. Our local gardeners often buy vegetable plants from Meinke’s Garden Center as they have the largest selection of vegetables at the best price in the area. Seed tapes for beets and carrots and cucumber seeds are purchased from the Burpee’s catalogue.

The space required for vegetable plants:

- Indeterminate (vining) heirloom tomatoes, including cherry and grape- One per sq. ft.
- Determinate (bush) tomatoes used for meat and marinara sauces (San Marzano paste tomatoes). One per 4 sq. ft.
- Sweet bell & hot peppers- one per sq. ft. However, 24 peppers can be in a 4’x8’ bed
- Eggplant one per sq. ft. However, 12 plants and 4 hills of cucumbers can grow on cattle fence in an 4’x8’ bed
- Green onions- 16 per sq. ft. planted in 4 squares in succession
- Carrots & beets- seed tapes require thinning as plants immerge

This local gardener does not follow square foot guidelines to reduce the harvest. Only plant what you can use.

The main difference between determinate and indeterminate tomatoes is when the tomato develops. Determinate tomatoes are ready for harvest in a two-week period, while indeterminate tomatoes are harvested throughout the growing season.

Once your beds are planned, the appropriate additives should be mixed into the soil prior to planting. Add one tablespoon of 5-10-10 fertilizer and potassium as each tomato and pepper is planted. On-line sites have information regarding what and how often to fertilize plants and prepare soil for planting. Indeterminate tomatoes need to have the first 3 or 4 suckers (see Internet for pruning procedure) removed. Periodic fertilization is necessary throughout the growing period. See the Internet for fertilization schedule. i.e. Monthly fertilization of tomatoes and peppers is one tablespoon of 5-10-10 fertilizer.

Maintenance

Every Fall, leaves from the yard can be shredded and a one-inch layer added to beds before turning soil. Nutriments are added to beds every spring. 2 bags of a good mulch or well-rotted mature are added to beds before turning soil. The well-rotted manure is applied to the eggplant and cucumber beds in particular. Weeds are impeded by Square Foot Gardening due to the proximity of the plants. However, a few find their way into the beds, requiring a weekly weeding lasting one hour.

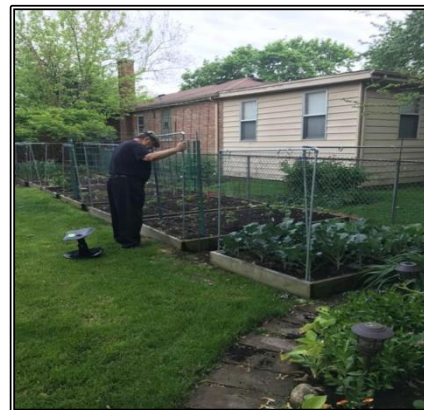
Watering becomes a knack. Too little or too much is not good for the garden. Too little and plant leave will wither. Too much and plants will begin to fall over. The best option is Rain! Other options include drip hoses, soaker hose, Snip & Drip irrigation system, watering wand, spay nozzles and a sprinkler. Whatever used, make sure the entire garden is watered.

SOURCES FOR INFORMATION:

From Burpeehomegarden.com, to a wide range of books available at the Chicago Public Library and classes and webpages at the Chicago Botanic Gardens, there are many places to look for help. The Edgebrook LIBRARY is a GREAT SOURCE and offers an array of books on the topic as well as a heritage seed catalog. VISIT THEM FOR MORE INFO!

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED BOOKS:

Square Foot Gardening, One Magic Square, Raised Bed Vegetable Gardening Made Simple, and Creative Vegetable Garden. This is a small list of what is available from our local library.



Look around your home and find the sunniest area to start gardening !