

# Vegetable Gardening

## There's A Better Way With This Handy-Dandy Plan

Maybe you've had success vegetable-gardening the old-fashioned, single-row, till-the-flat-ground way. Or maybe not. If you're up for something new, here's a better way to grow more veggies in less space with less work. It's a "Stauffers of Kissel Hill approved" system that pulls together elements from a lot of different gardening techniques. And it'll work whether you're a green rookie or a seasoned veggie veteran.

### Scrap The Single Rows

Start by planning your garden around raised beds with 4-foot-wide rows. Four feet is ideal because most people can easily reach in 2 feet from either side.

Single rows are a space-wasting hand-me-down from farming. Farmers need big pathways to maneuver their machinery. You don't. Wide rows will devote much more of your garden space to planting instead of paths. Besides wasting space, paths are prime sites for weeds unless you mulch or constantly cultivate.

Raised beds are a good idea because they'll give you deep, loose soil that you won't pack down by walking on it. The soil in these beds will only get better as you add organic matter every year, and you'll actually save money because you're only improving the soil in the beds, not all the soil in the garden.

Hold the soil in place in your raised beds with boards, cinder blocks, bricks stood on end, recycled plastic lumber or stone. Pressure-treated lumber is another option, but there's a potential that chemicals in the wood could leach into the ground and be taken up by the plant roots.

### Focus On The Soil

The No. 1 key to success in the vegetable garden is having good soil. Don't scrimp here!

Since much of central Pennsylvania's soil is either heavy clay or shale, you can figure you're going to have to improve it before planting.

Pick a sunny, reasonably level and well drained site for your garden and strip off the turf. Then "double-dig" the soil by going down twice as deep as your shovel blade. Next, mix in all the organic matter you can get your hands on — compost, peat moss, shredded leaves, Stauffers Planting Mix, aged manure, mushroom soil, whatever. One-third of this good stuff to two-thirds of your native soil would be ideal.

Rake the improved soil into mounds the size of your beds, build your edging around the mounds, and rake smooth. You can make the beds as long as you want, but we'd suggest sticking to the 4-foot widths.

Leave 18- to 24-inch pathways between beds. To hold down weeds, use some sort of mulch — straw, newspaper, old carpeting, grass clippings or our favorite, plastic covered with river stone or pea gravel.

### Smart Planting

Rather than planting everything in single, straight rows, you're going to be planting in blocks. This allows you to plant closely, especially when you use a staggered type of arrangement as shown at right.

Blocks let you plant the same distance apart in all directions. For instance, if you're planting radishes 4 inches apart, you'll be able to fit 16 of them into a single square-foot block.

For bigger plants like peppers, space them 1 foot apart. That means you'll be able to fit 16 of them in a 4-by-4-foot block.

Don't be afraid to play around with arrangements. Ring a block of carrots with onions; interplant head lettuce and radishes; use lots of small blocks or whole 4-foot-wide sections — whatever works for you.

Save more space by growing vining crops like cucumbers, tomatoes and peas up trellises or supports. And never leave a block empty. As soon as one crop is harvested, replace it with something else. (You could plant a section

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with radishes in early spring, replace it with beans in summer and then finish off with a fall crop of lettuce, for example.)

Planting this way may seem haphazard, but it helps keep bugs guessing and will force you to automatically “rotate” your crops. If you keep planting the same thing in the same space, you’ll rob the soil of the nutrients that plant uses most, plus you’ll perpetuate plant diseases.

One other design point: Keep the tallest plants to the north so they don’t shade out the shorter stuff.

## Weeds And Other Woes

The close planting in blocks will help snuff out a good bit of your potential problem with weeds. Just remember, any time you’ve got bare dirt, it’s just a matter of time before a weed finds it. So either fill all the space with veggies or put down a mulch.

For bigger plants such as broccoli, cabbage, tomatoes, peppers and potatoes that get 1-foot or more spacing, it makes sense to mulch the whole bed before planting. Suitable materials include black plastic, weed fabric or sheets of newspaper 8 pages thick. Good mulches for putting down after the fact (or around smaller plants) include straw, dried grass clippings or shredded leaves.

Since rabbits and groundhogs are common vegetable-garden pests around here, you might want to consider building a fence around your garden. Visit our garden-supply shop for other ideas and products to deal with these pests.

Bugs can be foiled in many ways if you’re trying to grow organically. One way to attract beneficial insects that eat the “bad” bugs is to plant herbs around the perimeter of your vegetable garden.

Floating row covers are great for keeping flying bugs off plants. These light-weight blankets lay directly on top of plants and let in light and rain while acting as a barrier to bugs.

Other good strategies for overcoming bugs and disease include: keeping plants well fed and well watered; planting varieties that have been bred to resist bugs and disease, and interplanting different plants so it’s harder for pests to zero in on their favorites.

If all that fails and damage is becoming intolerable, there’s a raft of repellents, oils, soap sprays and chemicals designed to attack any problem. Stauffers of Kissel Hill’s staff will be glad to help you find the right thing for the right problem.

## When to plant which vegetables

### Early spring

- \* Beets
- \* Broccoli
- \* Cabbage
- \* Carrots
- \* Cauliflower
- \* Leeks
- \* Lettuce
- \* Mesclun
- \* Onions
- \* Peas
- \* Radishes
- \* Spinach

### After last frost

- \* Beans
- \* Cantaloupes
- \* Corn
- \* Cucumbers
- \* Eggplant
- \* Okra
- \* Peppers
- \* Sweet potatoes
- \* Squash
- \* Tomatoes
- \* Watermelon

### Fall crops

- \* Broccoli
- \* Cabbage
- \* Carrots
- \* Garlic
- \* Lettuce
- \* Mesclun
- \* Radishes
- \* Spinach