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# Vegetable Gardening

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- Plot your garden and prepare the soil
- Combat pests with environmentally friendly methods
- Save money and improve your health

**Charlie Nardozi**

*Senior horticulturist and spokesperson,  
The National Gardening Association*

**The Editors of The National  
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# *Vegetable Gardening*

FOR

**DUMMIES®**

2ND EDITION

**by Charlie Nardozzi and the Editors of  
The National Gardening Association**



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# About the Authors

**Charlie Nardozi** has worked for more than 20 years bringing expert gardening information to home gardeners through radio, television, and the printed page. He delights in making gardening information simple, easy, fun, and accessible to everyone. His energy, exuberance, and love of the natural world also make Charlie an exciting public speaker and presenter. He currently is the senior horticulturist and spokesperson for the National Gardening Association (NGA). He also writes the *National News* as part of NGA's online publications, conducts media interviews about gardening and NGA, and provides horticultural consultation to NGA programs.

For 12 years Charlie was an editor with *National Gardening* magazine, writing stories on a variety of gardening topics from roses to tomatoes. He also has written for national magazines such as *Organic Gardening*, authored the first edition of *Vegetable Gardening For Dummies* in 1999 and *The Ultimate Gardener* in 2009, and contributed to other books such as *Gardening All-in-One For Dummies* (2003) and the Better Homes and Gardens' *Yard and Garden Owner's Manual* (Meredith Books, 2004).

Charlie's skills as a garden communicator extend beyond the printed page, however. In 2005, he was the host of PBS's television program *Garden Smart*, which reaches more than 60 million households. He also has been a gardening expert on many nationally syndicated television shows, such as HGTV's *Today at Home* and *Way to Grow*, Discovery Channel's *Home Matters*, and DIY's *Ask DIY*. He has appeared on QVC and the Home Shopping Network as well. At his home in Vermont, Charlie co-hosts the program "In The Garden," which offers weekly gardening tips on the local CBS affiliate television station, a weekly call-in gardening radio show on a local AM station, and gardening commentaries on public radio. He also hosts national and international gardening tours.

**The National Gardening Association**, founded in 1972, is a national not-for-profit leader in plant-based education, esteemed for its award-winning Web sites and newsletters, grants and curriculum for youth gardens, and research for the lawn-and-garden industry. NGA's mission is to advance the personal, community, and educational benefits of gardening by supporting gardeners, communities, and teachers with information and resources. For more information, please visit [www.garden.org](http://www.garden.org).



## *Dedication*

I'd like to dedicate this book to everyone who has ever thought about vegetable gardening or tried to grow some of their own food. I particularly want to dedicate this book to my wife, Wendy, who is the best partner in the garden and in my life.

## *Author's Acknowledgments*

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# Introduction

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**E**veryone loves good food. Fresh, tasty, nutritious food is our birthright. And what better way to have great food than to grow it yourself? You don't have to be a farmer to do so either. Whether it be a plot of land in the yard that's tilled up to grow vegetables, a few vegetables planted amongst your flowers and shrubs, or containers loaded with attractive, edible choices, growing your own food is a satisfying and rewarding activity.

Vegetable gardening isn't rocket science either. Heck, people have been growing their own vegetables for thousands of years. Like any pursuit, you just need some direction, good advice, and inspiration to get started. *Vegetable Gardening For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is for anyone who already grows vegetables or who has ever dreamed of growing some of their own food. All it takes is some resolve to get started. You're already halfway there just by picking up this book!

## About This Book

In this book, you can find all the basic information you need to grow a vegetable garden. It's great to read the book from front cover to back cover, but each section and chapter is complete in itself. So feel free to browse the vegetables or topics that you want to focus on first. I've been vegetable gardening my whole life, so throughout the book I try to impart some practical wisdom that's easily accessible. I also include some special tips and tricks that I've learned over the years and information on hundreds of vegetable varieties, many of which are beautiful to look at as well as tasty to eat. Of course, none of this matters if you can't grow the vegetables successfully. That's why a large part of this book is devoted to building soil, starting seeds, maintaining the garden, controlling pests, growing through the seasons, and harvesting. I like to encourage happy, healthy, successful gardeners who are willing to experiment, make mistakes, and enjoy sharing their bounty with their friends, family, and neighbors.

## Conventions Used in This Book

To help you navigate this book, I include the following conventions:

- ✓ All references to temperature are in degrees Fahrenheit. As a reminder, I include the label with the first reference in each chapter. After that, I save space (and paper!) by leaving it out.

- ✔ Variety names for each vegetable are indicated by single quotation marks. These are the common names you'll see when buying vegetable seeds and plants.
- ✔ *Italics* highlight new terms (which I define right away) and the Latin names of vegetables, which I use only when necessary.
- ✔ **Boldfaced** text highlights the keywords of bulleted lists and the action part of numbered steps.
- ✔ Web addresses appear in `monofont`.

When this book was printed, some Web addresses may have needed to break across two lines of text. If that happened, rest assured that I haven't put in any extra characters to indicate the break. So, when using one of these Web addresses, just type in exactly what you see in this book, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist.

## *What You're Not to Read*

I may think every word I've written on vegetable gardening in this book is intriguing, but I realize you have a life and may want to just get on with it. If you want only the basics, keep in mind that sidebars (in shaded gray boxes) and information tagged with the Technical Stuff icon aren't necessary to your basic understanding of vegetable growing and can be skipped, if you really have to.

## *Foolish Assumptions*

Before I even put one word to the page, I was thinking about who may read this book. Here's what I assume about you, the reader:

- ✔ You want to create a vegetable garden that's filled with healthy, nutritious, beautiful plants to eat.
- ✔ You want to understand the basics of vegetable gardening and, for experienced gardeners, find new tricks to help you garden better.
- ✔ You want to grow vegetables in an environmentally friendly manner.
- ✔ You want to try vegetable gardening even if you only have a deck or patio to grow a few plants.
- ✔ You want to share your love of gardening with friends, family members, and neighbors because you feel that if more people grew some of their own food, the world would be a better place.

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## *How This Book Is Organized*

Like all *For Dummies* books, this book is broken into parts. Each part has a number of chapters related to a theme. Here's an overview to get you oriented with the organization.

### *Part I: Digging Into the Basics of Vegetable Gardening*

Vegetable gardening is about more than just growing tasty food. You can find many other reasons and benefits of vegetable gardening, and I explain them in this part. I also cover information you need to know to plan your garden, such as determining the importance of sun and soil, deciding what to grow, and exploring some sample garden designs.

### *Part II: Vegging Out*

Each chapter in this part explores vegetables grouped by botanical family (such as the squash family) or commonality (such as root crops). Each chapter is loaded with the best varieties to grow and specifics on how to grow them. I also provide information to help combat specific pests that may attack each crop. Chapter 12 is all about other edibles, such as berries and herbs. Food comes in many forms, and berries and herbs are some of the easiest and most reliable producers in your yard.

### *Part III: Getting Down and Dirty in Your Vegetable Garden*

Now for the good stuff: building your garden and getting it growing. In this part, I talk about starting seeds; improving your soil; maintaining your garden with proper watering, fertilizing, and mulching; using some extra-cool gardening techniques, such as succession planting; applying pest and disease controls; growing in containers; and harvesting and storage. Whew, that's a lot of great information!

### *Part IV: The Part of Tens*

This book wouldn't be a *For Dummies* book without the always-popular Part of Tens. The final chapters in this book look at the ten best tools to get the job done and nearly ten great season-extending techniques that enable you to garden earlier in spring and later into fall.

## Icons Used in This Book

Like all *For Dummies* books, this book has icons that highlight great tips, warnings, and other specific topics. Here are the ones in this book:



Are you interested in growing plants in containers? If so, look for these icons throughout the book.



One of the best parts of vegetable gardening is involving kids. This icon marks plants that kids love or special gardening tips you can try with your little ones.



This icon highlights important information that helps you garden better. Don't forget this stuff!



If you want to go a little deeper in your knowledge of a plant or technique, read information marked with this icon.



This icon highlights information that saves time and money. Even experienced gardeners can learn something from these tidbits!



Sometimes you can make mistakes in the garden, and that's okay. To help minimize your mistakes, this icon alerts you to potential pitfalls.

## Where to Go from Here

Start with the basics by taking in the information in Part I about seeds, plants, soil, your site, and garden planning. Then dive into your list of dream vegetables that you want to grow in your garden. Come back to the book periodically throughout the growing season to find out more about pest solutions in Chapter 17 and season extending in Chapter 21. And don't forget to keep harvesting the fruits of all your fine work.

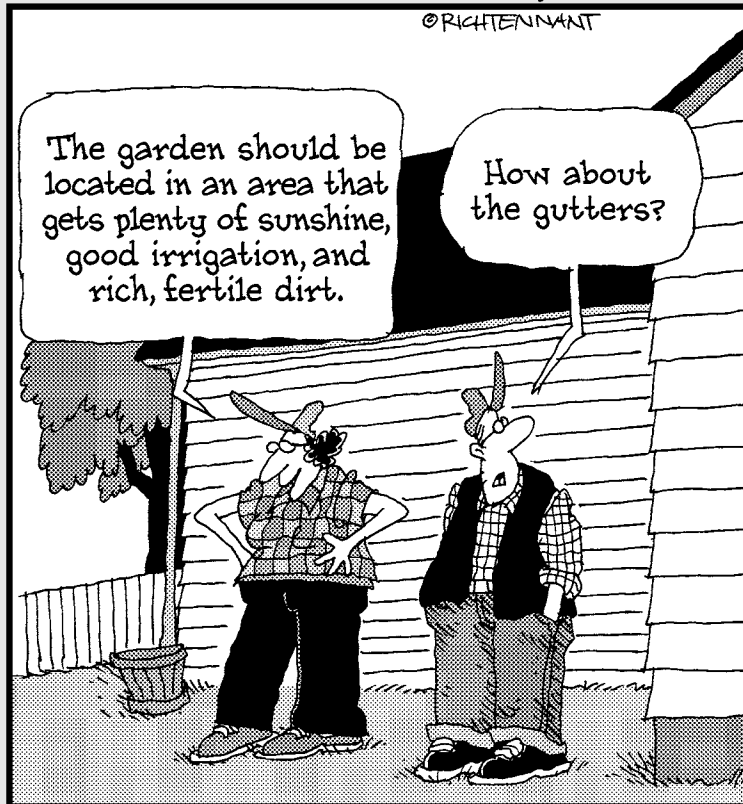
This is just the beginning of your vegetable garden experience. Many resources are available for vegetable gardeners (the appendix can get you started). The key is to get started and keep learning. After tasting one of your first homegrown peas, you'll be hooked for life.

# Part I

# Digging Into the Basics of Vegetable Gardening

The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave

By Rich Tennant



## *In this part . . .*

**I**n this part, I get your vegetable gardening juices flowing. You first find out the environmental, social, and health reasons for growing some of your own food. Then you delve into planning your plot; I talk about the right sun, soil, and growing conditions for your vegetable garden and provide ideas for garden designs along with some samples.



## Chapter 1

# Vegetable Gardening 101

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding why people grow veggies
  - ▶ Beginning with the basics of planning
  - ▶ Surveying some great vegetables to grow
  - ▶ Keeping your garden growing well
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**I**'ve been vegetable gardening my whole life. I've followed my grandfather picking stones out of the potato patch, weeded my mother's garden, taught my daughter to plant her first seeds, and built cold frames to maximize the amount of food my wife and I can grow in our yard with edible landscaping. I can attest that once you start, vegetable gardening becomes part of your life. It's not surprising that it grows on you.

In this chapter, I start you off with basics on site preparation, and I tell you what to grow and how to grow it. All the details that follow in subsequent chapters build on the information you need to know to be a successful vegetable gardener. Along the way I hope you are inspired to get some dirt under your fingernails and start your own garden. Dig in!

## *Why Have Your Own Vegetable Garden?*

Over the years people had drifted away from vegetable gardening in the spirit of progress and affluence. However, more recently people are once again realizing that growing their own food, although not as critical to survival as it once was, is an important part of a healthy body, mind, spirit, lifestyle, and community. More people are again turning to vegetable gardening as a means of food and as a hobby. Even the president and first lady have installed a vegetable garden at the White House. Vegetable gardening is officially back!

Who can resist the flavor, smell, and texture of food literally picked minutes before you eat it? If you've ever sunk your teeth into a sun-warmed, ripe tomato and felt the juices and flavors explode in your mouth, you'll know what I mean.



But vegetable gardening isn't just about taste. It's about safe food that's produced close to home. It's about knowing what has been sprayed on that food. It's about feeding your friends and family nutritious food that's high in vitamins and *antioxidants* (cancer-fighting compounds). It's about connecting with your neighbors and community as you experiment with ethnic dishes using exotic ingredients grown in your not-so-exotic backyard. It's about reducing pollution and global warming by not buying produce that's shipped hundreds of miles to your local grocery store. Finally it's about reclaiming your ability to grow some of your own food, even if it's a container of basil, to have a little more control in your life.

If you're interested in finding out more about the popularity and benefits of vegetable gardening, be sure to check out Chapter 2.

## The Basics of Planning a Veggie Garden

When's the best time to start vegetable gardening? Right now! Here are the basics on how to decide where to grow yours:

- ✓ Find a spot close to the house that you walk by daily so you don't forget about your project.
- ✓ Find a spot that gets at least 6 hours of direct sun a day.
- ✓ Find a spot that has great soil.



Keep your new garden small. You can be just as productive in a small raised bed garden, container, or small kitchen garden as you would be if you tilled your whole backyard. Start small, be successful, and then get bigger (if you want).

What should you put in your new garden? Well, you have many vegetable options when it comes to deciding what you can grow, so it's going to be tough deciding which ones to plant. The most important rule I can tell you is to grow what you like to eat. Yes, folks, this is all about taste. So no matter what people say about how easy beans are to grow, don't grow them if you hate to eat them. (Of course, after tasting fresh green beans from the garden, you may change your tune.) Grow a mix of varieties of favorite vegetables that you and your family will love. Also, try a few different ones to stretch your imagination.

Chapter 3 has plenty of pointers to help you plan your garden wisely.

## A Cornucopia of Vegetables to Grow

You can grow many different types of vegetables in your yard — and not just in the backyard. These days veggies are pretty enough to be front and center.

The following sections describe some of the most popular to get you started. Hopefully you have plenty of room!

## *Tomatoes*

Tomatoes are the most popular vegetable grown — and for good reason. The difference between a vine-ripened fruit and one picked green, gassed, and shipped hundreds of miles to your grocery store is incomparable. You can choose from container varieties that produce fruit the size of a pea and giant plants that grow to the height of a garage and produce fruits the size of a softball! You can even grow varieties of tomatoes with fruits every color of the rainbow except blue (however, I wouldn't be surprised to see that color someday either).



Tomatoes love the heat and sun and require fertile soil and support. Unless you're growing the dwarf varieties, stakes, cages, trellises, teepees, and arbors are essential for keeping plants growing upright and strong. You only need a few plants to keep your family in tomatoes most of the summer. Chapter 4 has the full scoop on growing tomatoes.

## *Peppers and eggplants*

Peppers and eggplants are related to tomatoes, but they're a little more homogeneous in their plant size. However, what they lack in plant variety, they make up in fruit uniqueness. Pepper fruits come shaped as bells or as long and thin tubular shapes. Some are as sweet as candy and others are hot enough to burn your mouth.

Pepper fruits mostly start out green and end up red, but where they go, colorwise, in between is amazing. You can experiment with chocolate-, yellow-, ivory-, purple-, lavender-, and orange-colored fruits that can be eaten raw or used in a multitude of cooked dishes. Eggplants also have burst onto the scene with varieties that produce unique-colored fruits, including white, purple, striped, and even orange.



If you can grow a tomato, you can grow peppers and eggplants. They need similar growing conditions. Plus, I love them as ornamental edibles. Not only do they look good in flower beds and containers, but you can eat them too! Chapter 5 has more on peppers and eggplants.

## *Carrots, onions, and potatoes*

Get to the root of the matter by growing carrots, onions, and potatoes. (I know, I couldn't resist the play on words!) Carrots, onions, and potatoes

love cool soil and cool weather conditions. Start them in spring for an early summer crop or in summer to mature in fall. Here are a few fun facts on each group (Chapter 6 has more information):

- ✓ **Carrots:** Carrot varieties are either short and squat or long and thin. You can even get colors other than orange, including red, purple, yellow, and white. Because their seeds are so small and take a while to germinate, carrots can be difficult to get started. But once they're growing you'll soon be munching on roots.
- ✓ **Onions:** Onions are adapted to the north and south depending on the variety. Some are sweet and can be eaten out of hand, but others are pungent and best for cooking and storing in winter. You can grow onions from seed, sets (bulbs), or plants.
- ✓ **Potatoes:** Potatoes are an easy cool-season crop to grow because you plant part of the potato to get new plants. If you cover the tubers with soil, hill them up, and keep them watered, you'll be rolling in spuds come summer.

## Peas and beans

Peas and beans are like brothers. They're in the same family and share similar traits, but in some ways they're very different!

- ✓ **Peas** are cool-season-loving crops that produce either plump or flat pods depending on the variety. With some pea varieties you eat pods and all. With others you eat just the peas inside.
- ✓ **Beans** love the heat. They're one of the easiest vegetables to grow. They come in bush and twining or pole bean forms.



Both are great vegetables in the garden because they require little fertilizer and care once they're up and running. Chapter 7 has details.

## Cucumbers, melons, pumpkins, and squash

I affectionately call cucumbers, melons, pumpkins, and squash the “viners.” They love to ramble about the garden, taking up space and producing loads of fruit. But even if you're a small-space gardener, you can still grow these space hogs. Newer varieties of cucumbers, squash, and melons can fit in a small raised bed or even a container.

One common trait of these vegetables is that they need heat, water, fertility, and bees. Bees? Yes, bees. Most of these squash family crops need to be cross-pollinated to produce fruit, so bees are critical to success. If you're

growing other vegetables, flowers, and herbs, you're sure to have some bees flying about to do the dirty work.



Some members of this veggie family can be prolific, so don't plant lots of zucchinis, cucumbers, and pumpkins. Then again, if you really want to share the harvest you can plant a bunch to give away!

Head to Chapter 8 for plenty of pointers on growing vining veggies.

## ***Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and cauliflower***

Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and cauliflower are similar in how they grow and what they need to grow. However, their differences come in the parts you eat. Here's the lowdown:

- ✔ After you pick the heads of cabbage and cauliflower, the plant is finished and stops producing.
- ✔ After you pick broccoli heads, you'll keep getting more broccoli side shoots to eat all season long.
- ✔ Brussels sprouts are like your crazy Uncle Louis. He looks a little strange, and you don't know where he came from. Brussels sprouts produce cabbagelike balls all along a straight stem. Keep picking the sprouts starting from the bottom to the top of the stalk and working up until it stops producing because of the cold.

This group of veggies is productive and serves as a great addition to a cool-weather spring or fall garden. See Chapter 9 for more information.

## ***Lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, and specialty greens***

If you're looking for quick rewards, go straight to Chapter 10 and grow greens: lettuce, spinach, chard, and wild greens, such as dandelions. Because you don't have to wait for greens to form fruits (you're just eating the leaves), you can pick them as soon as your stomach rumbles and the leaves are big enough to munch. They mostly love cool weather, so start early in spring and then keep planting and harvesting.



Greens are one of the best container vegetables to grow because they're easy and adaptable. You can mix and match lettuce varieties to produce different colors and textures that look beautiful and taste divine.

## *An assortment of other great veggies*

In the previous sections, I just touch the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what to grow for vegetable varieties. There are so many more vegetables to grow; all you have to do is wander down the produce aisles at the local grocery store and think, do I like to eat that? Chapter 11 describes more than 30 other vegetables to grow — from asparagus to turnips. Watch out or you may get hooked and start growing so many vegetables you'll have to open a restaurant. Vegetable gardening really can become that much fun.

## *Non-vegetable edibles*

Don't limit yourself to growing just vegetables in the vegetable garden. That would be silly! Berries, such as blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries, and herbs, such as basil, parsley, and chives, are great additions to your yard. They produce fruit, spice up a meal, and look beautiful. Need some inspiration? Here are some suggestions:

- ✓ Consider having a strawberry patch in your garden.
- ✓ Landscape your yard with blueberry bushes or a hedge of raspberries.
- ✓ Mix herb plants around vegetable plants or give them their own space in the garden. Herbs also grow well in containers mixed with flowers. I love growing rosemary in a deck planter each year for the attractive foliage and the enticing aroma.

Chapter 12 has plenty of details on growing berries and herbs in an edible landscape.

## *Getting Down to Growing*

Are you excited to grow some of your own food? Not so fast! You need a roadmap to get a successful start. Just like driving, if you get off in the wrong direction, it takes lots of time and effort to get back on course. So you have to start out with a plan and stick to it. The following sections are a quick run-through from seed to table of growing vegetables. After you read this section, head to the chapters in Part II for all the nitty-gritty details that will ensure success.

## *Choosing between seeds and transplants*

The easiest way to start a new garden is to grow those vegetables that can be planted from seed directly into the soil. For veggies that are best