



Get Your Garden in Gear

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Well it looks like the fear of one last frost is out of the way and now it's time to be getting your garden into shape for a summer full of fresh veggies. Gardening and growing your own food has certainly become more popular lately, and you might want to start a garden for the first time. Here are some good tips for getting started and keeping your first garden productive all year long.

Proper location is paramount in having crops that will grow. You will need a spot that receives at least 8-10 hours of sunlight each day. Most vegetables require full sun but some leafy vegetables can be grown in partial shade. Having a garden near trees and shrubs will result in competition for sun, water, and nutrients. You will want an area close to the house and/or source of water so you can keep an eye on things and easily get water to the garden. Soil type is not so important since you can add organic matter, but you do want a site that can be easily tilled and easily accessed.

Once you know where you'll put your garden, you have to determine the size of the garden and what crops you'll grow. Grow crops you know your family will enjoy and think about how much room some of those crops will take up. Your best bet is to draw a map of your garden, starting with the most space you think you will have and how many of each plant you might want. We have a great planting guide which lists popular crops with their plant spacing needed for proper growth. It's critical to not overcrowd your garden and drawing everything out ahead of time will prevent future problems.

Selecting the right varieties of plants is also important. Sticking with established varieties known to do well in Georgia is recommended. The University of Georgia College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences has conducted years of research to help you make the right choice. This information can be found at the Extension office.

Soil testing is always recommended to determine what the current pH and soil fertility levels are in your garden spot. Soil acidity determines how available nutrients will be to your plants and some plants do not do well in very acidic soils. A soil test will help you make accurate lime and fertilizer applications. If you don't think you have time to collect a soil sample and bring it by the office for analysis in time for planting. You can make some generic fertilizer applications depending on what type of crop you have. We group garden crops into three groups based on their nutrient demands. Heavy feeders include cabbage, potatoes, and tomatoes. These crops can require up to 35 pounds of 10-10-10 fertilizer per 1,000 square feet. Medium feeders such as beans, squash, pumpkin, corn, and watermelon can use up to 20 pounds of 10-10-10 per 1,000 square feet. Light feeders such as southern peas only need up to 10 pounds of 10-10-10 per 1,000 square feet.

It is not usually recommended to apply all of your fertilizer at one time prior to planting because it will not be efficiently utilized by the plant. It is better to apply half the fertilizer rate at planting and then apply the remainder in two to three side dressings at two to three week intervals. Proper side dressing involves using a hoe or rake to create a furrow about 4-5 inches from each side of the plants. Apply the fertilizer evenly and then cover the fertilizer back up with the soil.

Weed control is important because the water and fertilizer you apply may be used by the weeds rather than your garden crops. Use of chemicals is difficult in a garden situation because of the small area and variety of different crops present. Cultivation is the most effective means of weed control. This has to be done early and often to adequately keep weeds under control. Use a sharp hoe and skim the weeds just under the soil surface to cut off the root systems. Mulching around plants will also help prevent weeds and retain soil moisture.

This just begins to cover all the information on home gardening available at the Madison County Extension office. Come by some time or give us a call at 706-795-2281 to get more information. You can also find us on Facebook at "Madison County Ga Agriculture – Cooperative Extension."