Seattle’s climate is cool and wet, with cool dry summers. So heat-loving crops from hotter climates, like tomatoes, corn and peppers, are harder to grow here. But our mild spring, fall, and winter weather allows us to grow cool-loving Asian greens, kale, collards, spinach, and onions year ‘round.

Starting Your Garden
Learn in this guide how to:

Choose a place to garden
■ You need at least 6 hours of sun – without shade from trees or buildings. Make sure a water supply is close.
■ Consider sharing garden space with neighbors, or join a P-Patch or other community garden.

Prepare your soil for planting
■ Dig compost into the soil, or bury plant and food scraps.
■ Mound up soil into raised beds.

Choose the right seeds to plant
■ Grow what your family likes to eat, but choose vegetables that will grow well in our cool weather.
■ Plant seeds at the depth and spacing on the seed packet.
■ Plant when the soil is warm enough: Select seeds that say “80 days” or less to harvest on the seed packet. → See calendar on back.

Wait until May 15 to seed or transplant heat-loving plants.
■ Tomatoes, peppers and eggplant should be started in a greenhouse, then transplanted to beds in May.

Water and weed your garden
■ Seedlings need water daily. Water mature plants 2-3 times a week if it hasn’t rained.

Harvest, and prepare garden for winter
■ Ask other gardeners when to harvest, or read seed packet.
■ Cover beds before winter with mulch, or plant winter cover crops.
Choose a Place to Garden

Where is there sun?
Most vegetables need at least six hours of direct sunlight a day to grow well. Watch where the sun shines on your yard, and pick the sunniest spots to garden. Trees or buildings can block the sun, especially in spring or fall. A south-facing wall will warm quickly in the spring, and be good for heat-loving plants like tomatoes and peppers in summer.

Where can you grow?
Turn sunny lawn areas into garden by removing and composting the sod. Or to kill the lawn by covering it with 12 inches (30 cm) of wet fall leaves in November. Cover the leaves with cardboard or black plastic. Wait until May to dig up the area and start planting.

Build raised beds. Mix soil with compost. Mound the soil up into a raised bed to help the soil warm in spring. Plan paths between beds so you never walk on your loose, compost-amended soil. You can add sides to your raised beds made from concrete blocks, broken concrete, wood or plastic lumber. Don’t use chemically treated wood.

Try gardening in containers. You can use large pots or half-barrels to grow tomatoes, peppers, greens, even berries. Grow vertically on a sunny wall or in a window. Climbing plants like beans, tomatoes and cucumbers will grow if you provide good soil and poles for support.

Share with a neighbor, or join a community garden! Seattle’s P-Patch program can help you find a community garden near where you live. They are great places to grow food, learn, and meet other gardeners.

Testing your soil for lead or other contamination
Soil near old houses with peeling paint, or next to streets or in industrial areas may have lead, arsenic, or other contamination.

Call the Garden Hotline to find out where to get your soil tested, or to get a copy of WSU’s Gardening on Contaminated Soils. If you suspect that your soil is contaminated, build a raised bed and add 8 inches (20 cm) of fresh soil with compost.

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Prepare Soil for Planting

Compost is decomposed plants (leaves, grass, dead plants) and food waste. Compost helps soil hold nutrients and water to grow healthy plants. You can make your own compost from grass clippings, leaves, sod, weeds, plants and food wastes, or you can buy compost. You can also bury food waste in the garden, or chop and drop plants.

Mulch is any material you spread on top of the soil, to conserve water, control weeds, and slowly feed the soil as it decomposes. Good mulches for gardens include fall leaves, plant and grass clippings, straw, coffee hulls, or compost.

Mix compost into your garden soil.

Dig to loosen the soil 8 to 12 inches deep (20-30 cm) with a shovel or garden fork. Spread compost 2 or 3 inches deep (5-8 cm). Then mix the compost into the soil.

Or bury food and plant waste at least 6 inches (15 cm) deep to compost.

Soil for container growing

Mix one part compost with two parts sandy soil. Drainage in containers can be improved by adding a larger material like pea gravel or medium bark. You can also buy pre-mixed “potting soil.” If you have old potting soil in containers, you can add about 1/4 compost to freshen it for a new growing season.

Buying fertilizer? Look for “organic”.

While vegetables get most of the nutrients they need from compost, a complete “organic” (from natural sources) fertilizer can speed their growth. Look for “organic vegetable fertilizer” or fish fertilizer at your garden store.

Get a soil test to discover other nutrient needs. Washington soils may need lime every few years, which adds calcium and reduces acidity. Mix about 4 pounds (1.5 kg) of lime into soil per 100 square feet (9.3 square meters). Ask the Garden Hotline where you can send your soil sample for a test that will tell you about lime and other nutrient needs.
Plant the Right Seeds, at the Right Time

Choose plants that grow well in our cool climate.

Grow what your family likes to eat, but choose varieties of vegetables that will grow well in our cool, wet spring weather and cool, dry summers.

When to plant

Seeds need soil warm enough to sprout — typically at least 50-60°F (10-16°C). You can wait until the soil warms in May, or use a plastic cover to warm it more quickly.

Read seed packets for planting dates, and choose ones that say “80 days” or less to harvest. Peas and potatoes can be planted in March, but leafy greens should wait until April, and heat-loving crops like corn until late May.

Or buy seedling plants of heat-loving, long-season tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant, to transplant into the garden in late May. You can also grow them yourself from seeds planted indoors in March, in containers in a sunny window.

➔ See the Calendar on back page.

Planting seeds

Read the seed packet for planting depth and time. Tiny seeds like lettuce, carrots, and collards can be scattered on the prepared soil surface, then covered with a thin layer of compost or soil. Don’t plant these tiny seeds too deep! Larger seeds like peas, corn, and squash can be pushed with your finger one at a time into the prepared soil, at the depth and spacing described on the packet. Then water slowly to deeply moisten the soil.

Transplant heat-loving plants from greenhouse to garden in late May.

Make a hole as wide the seedling’s roots. Add compost or a sprinkle of fertilizer. Spread roots out, and gently push soil in around the roots. Water well. Plant at the same depth as the plant was in the pot at the greenhouse.

Water young seedlings regularly. Cover and protect seedling plants from extreme heat or cold until they are strong.
Thin and space plants – give them room to grow.

Follow the spacing directions on the seed packet. After seeds sprout and have a few leaves, thin (remove) seedlings to that spacing. You can also transplant seedlings from crowded areas to areas that aren’t full. This will ensure that plants have enough room to grow, and give you a bigger harvest. You can eat the little plants you pull as salad.

Succession planting

Plant more seeds every few weeks as long as the weather is warm, so that your harvest will continue into the fall. But don’t plant cool-loving crops like peas and spinach in hot July weather. Plant fall cool crops in August to early September.

Rotate crops

Some crops get diseases that stay in the soil for a year or more. And some crops use up soil nutrients quickly. To avoid problems, rotate (move) crop families to a different bed each year.

Example

1st Year:
Bed A Tomato
Bed B Onion
Bed C Cabbage

2nd Year:
Bed A Cabbage
Bed B Tomato
Bed C Onion

3rd Year:
Bed A Onion
Bed B Cabbage
Bed C Tomato

Other vegetable families that benefit from changing locations each year:
cilantro  carrot  parsley
beet  chard  spinach
corn  wheat  squash
cucumber  melon  squash
lettuce  radicchio  endive
pea  bean  clover

These families can all be planted together with the tomato, cabbage, and onion families.
**Water your garden**

Check your garden daily in hot summer weather. Water before vegetables droop, or when the soil feels dry 2 inches (5 cm) down. In cooler, rainy spring and fall you'll only need to water young seedlings. Direct water to the plant roots. Use a watering wand, or in flat areas lay out a soaker hose between rows and cover it with mulch. Water enough to moisten the whole root zone – dig a few inches down to see if the soil is moist. Plants in containers dry out more quickly than in the garden. Always water in the evening or early morning, to avoid evaporation waste and prevent wet plant damage from the mid-day sun.

**Control weeds and pests**

*Spread mulch* (leaves, grass clippings) and pull weeds before they go to seed. 

*Most bugs are good bugs* that help control pests. Learn which bugs are problems, and how to control them. 

*Don’t use chemical pesticides.* They can poison your family and birds, pets, and fish. Call the Garden Hotline to identify pest or weed problems, and learn about non-toxic solutions.

**Garden All Year**

Our climate is cool and wet in spring and fall, and usually above freezing in winter. So heat-loving plants like corn are hard to grow, but cool-loving plants are easy.

*Extend your season with cold-hardy crops.* Bok choi, kale, collards, broccoli, carrots, leeks, and garlic can be planted in late summer or early fall to grow for harvest all winter or in spring.

▶ See the Calendar on back page.

*Grow under cover.* Start spring plants in a greenhouse or “cold frame,” or extend fall growth with a plastic cover.

*Plant berries and other plants that grow for many years* Add these plants to your landscape wherever there’s sun: blueberries and strawberries, artichokes, asparagus, even dwarf fruit trees or grapes. Ask the Garden Hotline about best varieties for our climate.
Harvest vegetables before they go to seed. See seed packets for “days to maturity” and photos of ready-to-harvest plants, or ask gardeners at your local community garden about when to harvest.

Share your harvest. If you have more than you can eat, share with neighbors or call the Garden Hotline or see the P-Patch and Lettuce Link websites on back to learn about where to donate food.

Saving seeds is easy with most green leafy plants. Just hang the mature seed stalk to dry. Fruiting plants like tomatoes and squash often cross-breed, so saved seed may not produce good fruit. Call the Garden Hotline to learn more about saving seed, or any garden question.

Prepare Gardens for Winter

Fall is time to clean up the garden, compost dead plants, and protect your garden from winter weeds and from rainfall washing soil away.

Cover crops are usually legumes like clover, planted in October to grow through the winter. They protect the soil, and provide nutrients when you dig them into the soil before planting in spring.

Winter mulches should cover any soil areas not planted with overwintering crops or cover crops. Collect fall leaves and spread them 2-3 inches deep to cover exposed soil. You can also chop dead plants and spread them on the soil.

Composting returns nutrients back to the soil. Chop up old garden plants, along with grass clippings and fall leaves, to build your compost pile. Choose a shady spot, and moisten materials as you build your pile.

Or bury food scraps (to keep animals away) under garden beds all winter to improve the soil.

You can also learn how to compost kitchen scraps in a rodent-resistant worm bin. Weeds and diseased plants, along with dairy or meat scraps from the kitchen, should go into the City’s yard-and-food-waste collection for hot composting.

In spring, you can use your compost or buy compost to enrich your soil for another year of growing.
Easy Crops for Beginner Gardeners

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Learn More about Gardening

Questions? Call The Garden Hotline
(Seattle Public Utilities) free brochures on soil, composting, watering, pest control, and more.
Language interpretation available.

P-Patch Program of Seattle’s Department of Neighborhoods provides community garden spaces in many neighborhoods, at low or no cost. Translated classes. Everyone is welcome.

Seattle Parks classes, community gardens
City of Seattle’s Food website
Urban farming news and resources
WSU Extension Master Gardeners

Lettuce Link information on gardening, sharing harvests, and Gardening for Good Nutrition

Tilth Alliance provides classes, demonstration gardens, volunteer opportunities, and The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide

Learn More about Gardening

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