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News Release

Tips for the Novice Vegetable Gardener

Question: I want to grow a vegetable garden this year. Do you have any tips for the novice vegetable gardener?

Answer: Vegetable gardening can be a relaxing escape from the pressures of a fast paced life, but for the beginner it might increase rather than reduce your stress. However, if done well growing fresh vegetables, herbs, or fruits can provide a great sense of joy and accomplishment. A vegetable garden can also reduce the family's food budget, and it can be a source of hard-to-find items such as Chinese cabbage, heirloom tomatoes, or fresh herbs.

Because it was considered unsightly, the vegetable garden has traditionally been located in an area separate from other parts of the landscape. With proper planning, however, the garden can be both functional and attractive. Today landscape designers often incorporate ornamental plants such as flowering annuals into the vegetable garden and vice versa. This gardening philosophy, coupled with our favorable climate, can offer gardening opportunities nearly all year long.

If you are a beginning gardener, I suggest you start small. An area of 50 square feet is a good size to start with and you will be surprised how much you can grow in that area. The tendency for most beginning gardeners is to start too large and give up in frustration when the going gets tough.

Regardless of size, there are five factors to consider in selecting a garden site:

- **Sunlight:** The first is sunlight. The garden should receive at least 6 hours of direct sunlight each day. Therefore, vegetables should be planted away from the shade of buildings, trees, and shrubs. Some leafy vegetables such as broccoli, collards, spinach, and lettuce tolerate shadier conditions more than other vegetables. However, if your garden does not receive a minimum of 6 hours of sunlight, you are fighting a losing battle with most vegetable crops.
- **Convenience to your home:** The closer the vegetable garden and the easier it is to access, the more likely you will harvest in a timely manner. It is also more likely that you will keep up with jobs such as weeding, watering, insect and disease control, and succession planting.
- **Soil:** You do not need to have the ideal type of soil to grow a good garden because you can alter the soil. However, if possible the soil should be fertile and easy to till, with just the right texture, a loose, well-drained loam with good organic matter content. Avoid any

soil that remains soggy after a rain. Heavy clay and sandy soils can be improved by adding organic matter. Of course, gardening will be easier if you start with a naturally rich soil.

- **Water:** Including rain and irrigation, the garden needs at least 1 inch of water per week. Therefore, it is essential to locate the garden near a spigot or some other water source. Drip irrigation is ideal because you wet only the soil around the roots of the desired plants without wetting the weeds or vegetable foliage. Make sure to run the drip system frequently during hot dry weather.
- **Good air drainage:** The fifth and often neglected consideration is good air drainage. Avoid locating the garden in a low spot such as the base of a hill or the foot of a slope bordered by a solid fence. These areas are slow to warm in the spring, and frost forms more readily in them because cold air cannot drain away. Vegetable gardens located on high ground are more likely to escape light freezes, permitting an earlier start in the spring and a longer harvest in the fall. Also, avoid planting items too close which can lead to poor air circulation and increased disease problems.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System is planning a series of “Home Garden Workshops” around the state. The St. Clair County Extension office has scheduled its first of a series of workshops on Friday, March 20th. It will be held at Jefferson State Community College—Pell city campus from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. The cost is \$10, which will cover material and lunch. To attend, you must pre-register no later than Monday, March 16th. Registration forms and more information about the workshop are available at the Extension office, located on the lower level of the St. Clair County Courthouse in Pell City, Suite 103 or on the website at www.aces.edu/StClair. For more good garden information and dates and locations of other workshops offered throughout the state visit: <http://www.aces.edu/homegarden>. For information about the workshop or gardening, please contact Tony Glover at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu.