



## Gardening Tips

Gardening can be easy, fun and productive, or it can be a lot of hard, wasted work. A certain amount of work is involved, but it doesn't have to be continuous, hard work throughout the growing season. Much of what *you* do determines how much of a chore your garden is and how much it will produce. This isn't meant to be a definitive guide to gardening, but it does contain things we've learned from years of gardening and making many of the mistakes listed ourselves.

1. **Planning** – Your garden plan doesn't need to be extremely detailed, but you should make one. A simple map of your layout, and what you plan on growing in each row or bed, helps you to determine how many plants or seeds you will need. This information from the previous year will also help you determine how to rotate your crops.
2. **Soil preparation** – Till your soil when it is dry enough in the spring, but not too far in advance of when you are going to plant or it is a waste of time. Tilling too early allows weeds to start to grow, or the soil may even start to harden back up again. Work in good compost, peat moss or any other amendments that your soil may need.
3. **Planting time** – When you plant depends on where you live. It's better to plant a little later when the soil is warmer, and the danger of frost is past, than to put plants out early. If you put out plants that come from a warm environment, like a greenhouse, into cool or cold soil you can damage their roots causing them to fall behind plants put out later. In the Northeast this usually means putting plants out in late May, usually around Memorial Day weekend.
4. **Rotate your crops** – Planting the same crop, in the same row, year after year is a disaster waiting to happen. Plant specific pests and diseases can linger in the soil for years and infect your new plants. When planning your rotation, be aware of what plants are in the same family – for instance it is not recommended to plant potatoes where tomatoes, peppers or eggplants were previously grown. A good listing of common vegetable plants, listed by family, can be found on the University of Iowa's website: <http://www.ipm.iastate.edu/ipm/hortnews/1998/3-27-1998/rotateg.html>
5. **Plant strong, healthy plants** – Planting weak or diseased plants doesn't work – period. We've tried planting the "culls" from our greenhouse, plants that are below the quality that we will sell to the public. While a few have turned out OK, most have not grown or produced well. It's better to spend a little more money for fewer quality plants than to buy more, but inferior ones.
6. **Overcrowding** – Plants need a certain amount of space for foliage and root growth. In addition, overcrowding can also promote disease by not allowing proper air flow around



the plants. Follow the spacing guidelines and resist the temptation to put your plants too close together.

7. **Mulch mulch mulch!** – Plant a row, mulch a row, move on to the next. Don't be tempted to plant everything, then mulch later. Somehow it doesn't happen and then you'll need to weed before mulching. Mulching your plants is the single best thing you can do for both them *and* yourself. When the temperature is cool mulch will help retain warmth in the soil, while in hot weather it helps protect the plants from overheating. In dry weather it helps retain moisture, either from rain or from watering. The most important thing about mulch is that it keeps down weeds reducing the amount of weeding necessary. For most gardeners weeding is the most time consuming, labor intensive task. Lack of timely weeding and subsequent weed growth is the reason for most garden failures. A good source for what to use for mulch can be found on the USDA website: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/FEATURE/backyard/mulching.html> and at the University of Connecticut website: [http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu/factsheets/tp\\_05\\_mulchbasics.html](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu/factsheets/tp_05_mulchbasics.html)
8. **Water** – Consistent watering is critical for good plant growth and crop production. Uneven or over watering, on the other hand, can stress both plants and produce. Root rot from over watering or tomatoes splitting because of inconsistent watering are some examples of this. Slow watering with a drip hose is the best method. Hand watering with a good watering can for small gardens or a hose and watering wand, such as the ones made by Damm, for larger gardens works well, too. Watering with a sprinkler is the least amount of work, but uses the most water and is the least efficient. Water until the ground is thoroughly wet several inches down to promote good, deep root growth.
9. **Fertilizer** – Many types of fertilizer are available, but in most “big box” stores the only thing you seem to be able to find is that blue stuff which supposedly produces “miracle” results. Organic fertilizers, such as Neptune's Harvest, are increasingly difficult to find locally, but are readily available on the Internet. Neptune's is all we use on our plants in the greenhouse, in our own garden and is the only fertilizer we sell. It is a mild, balanced fertilizer. It contains the necessary trace elements needed for strong, healthy plant growth and makes use of a waste product which used to be dumped into the ocean. Think you need that “miracle” fertilizer? The top 2 pumpkins grown in 2007 were grown using Neptune's products – they weighed over 1600lbs *each*. For more information go to: <http://www.neptunesharvest.com>
10. **Pest Control** – Early and often is the best way to control pests. Using organic methods instead of poisons is preferable – remember you're spraying or dusting these chemicals on your food. For cutworms, place a cardboard or tinfoil collar around plant stems at ground level. Hand picking pests early prevents an outbreak later. Use row cover on your Brassica family (cabbage, brussel sprouts, etc.) to keep cabbage moths away. If you already have cabbage worms then spraying with *Bacillus thuringiensis* or B.t. may be



necessary. Another easy, organic method of pest control is setting out beer traps for slugs. There is no need to buy them, just use an old “pie tin” or similar container filled with cheap beer set into the ground with the top at soil level.

11. **Pick on time** – While this seems like a “no brainer”, it is important. Picking on time prevents waste and promotes additional vegetable growth. Zucchini, summer squash and cucumbers become too large very quickly, and cabbage can split if left too long.
12. **Fall cleanup** – Remove all old plants from your garden as soon as they stop producing. If you have a compost pile, then add them to it, but only if they are disease free. If possible leave old mulch in place to rot over the winter and provide organic material for spring tilling. If you have a bagging lawn mower bag grass clippings and leaves in the fall – only use clippings from a lawn that has not been treated with any type of herbicide! Pile the clippings 4-6” deep on your planting beds to be tilled into the soil in the spring or add them to your compost pile.