

## Top 10 Ways to a Better Veggie Garden<sup>1</sup>

A well informed gardener can be happy with their accomplishments in the garden with a few simple guidelines. Working with and understanding the natural growth of plants will help immensely to get the results you want without all of the extra work.

10. **Good Bug, Bad Bug?** – Knowing the bad ones from the good ones will get you moving in the right direction. Gardeners are best off adopting integrated pest management where they scout, identify, and then control harmful insects. Most plants can take on quite a few bad insects before harm is done. Many times, picking off the bad insects can work. Knowing the insect and its life cycle will also help eliminate the potential destruction. Maintaining the good bugs will help reduce some populations of the bad ones.
09. **Lift Your Plants** – You can decrease disease pressure immensely if you can change the environment which supports diseases. The best environment for disease? Cool temperatures, darkness and humidity/moisture. So, if you can control the environment (i.e. – eliminate moisture through proper airflow and sunlight exposure) disease can be controlled or eliminated! Use stakes, trellises, panels, fencing and whatever else you can find to get plants up off the ground. Items need to be strong and sturdy to support plants at their largest size.
08. **Prune** – Suckering tomatoes, but also thinning their thick canopy will help improve air flow and reduce disease. Pruning is a chore, but saves lots of time later. Pruning basics: prune for air flow and sunlight penetration. Make clean cuts. Tomato cages limit your ability to prune and harvest.
07. **Pollinate** – Yes, bees and other insects can pollinate the plant. Protect ground nesting bees, bumble bees and carpenter bees. But, are there other rules? Sweet corn must be planted in squares, not just rows. They need another plant's pollen to pollinate. Blueberries? Apples? These need another cultivar for full production.
06. **Mulch** – Using four layers of newspapers will stop most weeds in the vegetable garden for the season. Do this after seeds emerge and transplants are planted. Cover with a thin lay of mulch (grass clippings, bark, compost, etc.) Wetting during application keeps them from moving around. For other mulches, mulching too thick can kill plants. Mulching too thin can leave you with lots of weeds. Mulching takes some work and practice to find what best fits you. Mulching also reduces the splash effect, where soil borne diseases get onto the plant.
05. **Recycle** – Compost will help add organic matter to clay for better root penetration. Compost will help sandy soil hold more water and nutrients. Either way, plants will be healthier for the addition. A compost pile can be simple. Start with all yard/garden waste and everything from the kitchen (except oils and meat scraps). Other ways to recycle? Find used stakes for tomatoes, sheets for frost protection, newspapers for mulch and more.
04. **Know the Soil** – Have you ever used lime on your garden? Is it worth \$20 every couple of years to save \$30 on fertilizer? Only a soil test can steer you in the correct direction. The pH of the soil (chemical charge) can affect how and if your plants can take up certain nutrients. Soil testing is simple and can take all of the guess work out of liming and fertilization. Soils in the valley range from hard clay to coarse sand.
03. **Water the Roots** – Even though the gardener in the commercial looks happy and the plants look happy when water sprayed all over the tops of plants – neither will be happy for too long. Watering should happen at the root zone. Use of soaker hoses along the row or slow draining buckets to conserve water and plant health.
02. **Cleanup** – Many of us do not do a good job cleaning up plant debris in the fall. This debris left all winter harbors disease into the next year. Pull out plants, rake up dead leaves and get these out of the garden area. Plant a cover crop to hold soil in place and to provide more organic matter for next season's crop.
01. **Practice & Learn** - The more you grow, the more you will find out what works best for you. Attend classes or gardening events to see how others are improving their gardens. Use the internet to search, but use "university extension" in your search to get the correct answers on how to be the best gardener.

NEED INFO? For details on these items, use "university extension" with the terms you are using to search. You'll find our factsheets and information from other universities across the US.

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