Feature

Getting Started With Veggies
by Patty Brown

Who would have thought that growing your own lettuce or tomatoes would be the fashionable thing to do? Vegetable gardens are becoming downright trendy. The White House has one, and so do an increasing number of backyards across America. It’s easy to see why: growing your own produce provides fresh, nutrient-rich vegetables for your table while saving money at the grocery store. (And if you support the ‘buy local’ movement, you can’t get more local than your own backyard!)

If you haven’t yet given vegetable gardening a try yet, a little planning and preparation will enable you to get started. First, think of three key S’s: Site, Soil, and Selection.

Site
Vegetables typically need a minimum of 6-8 hours of sun each day. Ideally, the garden’s location will be close to your house and to a water source, such as your garden hose or a rain barrel. Having the garden nearby, rather than at the far end of your yard, makes it more convenient to provide two ingredients necessary for gardening success: TLC and H₂O—tender loving care and water. The site should also drain well, as plant roots will rot in soil that remains soggy.

If you don’t have sufficient space in full sun for a designated garden area, peppers, squash, cucumbers and other vegetables can be planted where there is space in the landscape. A trellis will provide support where needed and keep plants looking tidy, too. Containers are another option for vegetables such as tomatoes and lettuces. Check into self-watering containers, which
reduce maintenance and ensure that plants don’t dry out between watering.

Soil

In conjunction with the right site, the right soil assures success. One of the easiest ways to establish a new garden area is to create a raised bed. Raised beds can be filled with soil specially formulated for growing fruits and vegetables. Soil can be purchased by the bag at “big box” stores, or at local hardware and feed stores. For large garden areas, soil can be purchased from landscape supply companies and delivered directly to your driveway (see the note at the end of this article about the 4th S: Simplicity). Since you’ll be eating the fruits (or vegetables) of your labor, you may want to consider using organic soil, which contains only ingredients that have been certified as organic. Organic soil doesn’t contain the chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides and herbicides that other soils may have.

If you’re establishing a new garden bed that’s level with the existing grade, you’ll need to remove all grass or other vegetation, add 3 to 4 inches of compost, and till to a depth of 6-8”. Compost provides nutrients for your plants and improves soil structure. In the heavy clay soil common in much of Johnston County, composts loosen up the clay, while in parts of the county with sandier soil that drain too quickly, compost helps retain moisture.

(Plant) Selection: Most gardeners would agree that this is the fun part! But you have so many choices, how do you decide? Well, first consider what vegetables you like to eat. Since your space is limited, you’ll want to focus on vegetables that don’t require lots of room and/or aren’t readily available locally. For example, corn takes quite a bit of space to grow, is commonly available in summer, and is fairly inexpensive, so it’s usually not worthwhile to grow corn. Once you have a short list of candidates, research their growing requirements. (An easy way to do this is to check a seed catalog, such as Burpee at http://www.burpee.com. You’ll learn how long it takes a particular plant to mature, spacing requirements and more. A more extensive resource is the Cooperative Extension’s “Home Vegetable Gardening” publication, which is available online at http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag-06.html.)

Once you’ve decided on a site, prepared the soil, and factored in the requirements of the plants you’ll grow, you’re ready to get started, but keep in mind the 4th S: Simplicity. If growing a vegetable garden for the first time, you’ll likely find you don’t have room for as many plants as you want. That’s actually a good thing; it’s best to start small so you don’t get overwhelmed by the regular maintenance gardening requires. (In the height of summer, you’ll need to visit daily or at least every other day.) Most vegetables can be started from seed without much difficulty or expense, but you can simplify the time and labor involved by purchasing inexpensive seedlings in six-packs or larger quantities. Plant according to the directions provided on the seed packet or with the seedlings. Maintain the garden by thinning plants to the proper spacing, watering and weeding as needed, and keeping an eye out for
pests. As you work in your garden, take time to smell the radishes and it’s likely you’ll find the process of growing your own vegetables as rewarding as harvesting them.

**FEATURE PLANT**

Green and Gold  
*Chrysogonum virginianum*  
by Shawn Banks

This native, semi-evergreen ground cover reaches a height of about 9 inches. In a moist, well-drained soil located in full sun this plant has a rapid growth rate. When planted in less than ideal growing conditions, the growth rate slows. The plant spreads by rooting at nodes as the stems become long and lay over onto the ground. It may also self-seed. It has not been known to become weedy or invasive.

The beautiful green foliage provides a nice contrast to the golden yellow flowers, which are held high above the foliage in the spring and sporadically throughout the summer. Even when planted in part shade this plant will produce quite a showing of golden flowers. For the gardener interested in attracting wildlife to the garden, this native wildflower attracts bees and butterflies to the garden.

Photo by Christopher Todd Glenn, retrieved from JC Raulston Arboretum photographs.

**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**Gardening with Native Plants** - March 15 @ 6:30-8:00pm, JC Ag Bldg, Smithfield. Instructor, Mrs. Karen Blaedow, Horticulture Agent in Wayne County. To pre-register call 919-989-5380.

**Blackberry Workshop** - March 10 @ 9am-12pm, CEFS Service Bldg, 201 Stevens Mill Rd, Goldsboro, NC. Instructor, Gina Fernandez, NC State Specialist. Contact Diane Lynch at 919-731-1525 for more information.

**Events at Johnston Community College** – These events have a $15 fee, and people interested in attending these events should pre-register on their website or by calling 919-209-2052.

**Sustainable Gardening and The Bees** - Tuesday, March 6, 2012 - 6:30 - 8:30pm - Learn good management strategies and practices that will enhance your plants while sustaining the environment.

**Pruning Crape Myrtles and Azaleas with Minda Daughtry** - Wednesday, March 7, 2012 - 10:00am - Noon - $10.00 Learn how to correctly prune your crape myrtles and azaleas so they look their best while remaining healthy at this hands-on workshop. Dress appropriately for outdoors. Limited enrollment – 15 pp.

**Fruit and Berry Pruning, Maintenance Workshop with Shawn Banks** - Tuesday, March 13, 2012 - 2:00pm - 5:00pm - Learn the basics of pruning fruits and berries.

**Sustainable Food Systems with Tony Kleese** - Tuesday, March 20, 2012 - 6:00pm - 9:00pm - learn what a sustainable system is in relation to growing, processing, and distributing food and why our current system is unsustainable.
The spruce spider mite is one of the cool season mites, which are active when the weather is cool but not freezing. Most years this mite is only active in the spring and in the fall. Because of the mild winter we have had this year, there is a chance spruce spider mites have been active all winter. The adult is almost black in color with pale, yellowish-brown legs. At maturity, with legs spread wide, this tiny insect might be the size of a period. A magnifying glass or a microscope may be needed to see these mites.

As the name suggests, the spruce spider mite feeds on spruce, juniper, arborvitae and other coniferous evergreen. They feed by sticking their, piercing-sucking, mouthpart into the leaves or needles and sucking the juice out. This feeding method causes the cells inside the needles to collapse. The feeding damage becomes more evident as the temperatures warm and the plant becomes stressed. The feeding damage gives the needles a gray or brown look to them. In cases of heavy infestation the needles may fall off prematurely and small silk webs will be noticeable on the stems of the plants.

Some research has shown that the mites are most active in the spring about the same time the redbuds bloom. If you have conifers that are looking a little gray, you may want to look at some of the older needles to see if they have damage or active populations caused by spruce spider mites. If you find active insects insecticidal soap or horticultural oil may be used to control the immature and adult stages of this mite.

Growing your own greens is a fun and inexpensive way to up the fiber factor in your diet. Not only do they taste great but they contain Vitamins A and C, beta-carotene, calcium, folate, and antioxidant-rich phytonutrients.

As a side dish or a main course, salad greens can be as colorful as they are flavorful. To me, it’s like art on a plate! For those who like the old standards there are head lettuces like Boston Bibb, Romaine or Iceburg. For the adventurous gardener and cook, why not try loose leaf types like mesclun mixes? What about other greens such as spinach, chard, cress, chicories, arugula, mustards, dandelion, or even beet tops? Colors range from deep red to speckled green, textures range from frizzy to smooth, and shapes may range from oak leaf to scoop-like. Why the possibilities are endless!
Nothing beats the flavor of a freshly picked salad so get out there and mix it up in the garden. To learn more about greens, check out this helpful visual guide at [http://www.epicurious.com/articlesguides/seasonalcooking/farmtotable/visualguidesaladgreens](http://www.epicurious.com/articlesguides/seasonalcooking/farmtotable/visualguidesaladgreens)

The following is a recipe for a lightly dressed, refreshing salad.

**Mesclun Salad With Walnuts & Grapes**

**Dressing:**
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 2 teaspoons grated orange zest
- 3 tablespoons orange juice
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon
- 6 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

1 quart mixed mesclun lettuces, washed and dried

1 cup red Flame or other seedless red grapes

1/3 cup chopped toasted walnuts

In a small bowl, combine vinegar, orange zest, juice and tarragon. Add oil gradually, whisking until thoroughly combined. Place mesclun in a salad bowl and toss with dressing.

Sprinkle grapes and nuts over salad just before serving.

**MARCH GARDEN TASKS**

**LAWN MAINTENANCE**

(or this month it’s ‘What do I do about weeds?)

- REMEMBER, the best defense against weeds is a healthy lawn. Learn how to care for your lawn throughout the year. Visit [TurfFiles](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html) and click on Turf Tips to learn more about your lawn type. Keep it healthy, healthy and weed free.
- Control existing weeds now, before they get large and/or set seed. A little work now will save a lot of trouble later.
- For yards with an established weed problem, use pre-emergent herbicides to kill seedlings as they germinate. Pre-emergent herbicides can be used to control crabgrass and other broadleaf weeds. Pre-emergent herbicides (according to label directions) should be applied while the forsythia is in bloom, late February to mid-March.
- Sharpen mower blades! A sharp blade cuts. A dull blade tears - making grass susceptible to diseases.

**TREES, SHRUBS & ORNAMENTALS**

- Divide fall-blooming perennials that are overgrown, such as asters, primrose, irises, violets, shasta daisies and mums. This is an easy way to enlarge your garden.
- Control leaf gall on azaleas and camellias. Leaf gall, a fungal disease, shows up as swollen leaves covered with a white powdery material. It is unsightly but generally not harmful to the plant. Pick off the affected leaves and dispose of them to avoid spreading the fungus.
- Do not compost diseased plant material.
- Remove protective winter mulch from tender perennials in early March to warm the soil and stimulate the plant to grow. Apply fresh mulch in April after perennials have emerged. Mulch helps with water conservation and weed control. [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-608.html)
- Spring flowering shrubs such as quince, spirea, forsythia, azalea, Camellia japonica, Carolina Jessamine, viburnum, mock orange, weigela, Oriental magnolia and Indian Hawthorn flower on old
growth. Prune them soon AFTER they bloom.

- Time for heavy, rejuvenation pruning of summer-blooming shrubs. Prune holly, Nandina and Beautyberry before new growth begins.
- Althea, Buddleia, Vitex, Crape Myrtle and Pomegranate can be pruned at the beginning of March to stimulate more flower production later.
- For a better show next spring, let the foliage of spring-flowering bulbs die back naturally.
- Are you fighting to keep grass growing under your trees? Or is there bare ground that erodes in heavy rains? Trees usually win in any competition for moisture and nutrients, and turfgrass is not well adapted to life in the shade. Mulch or living groundcovers are better choices than grass under large trees.
- Ground covers act as "living mulch." Low-maintenance, shade-tolerant ground covers include pachysandra, periwinkle (vinca), ajuga (bugleweed), liriope or mondo grass.
- A 2-3” thick layer of composted mulch conserves moisture, reduces erosion and provides nutrients to the tree. Keep mulch away from the trunk of the tree to discourage rodents and rot.
- Protect shade tree roots from injury. Remember that most of a tree's feeder roots are near the soil surface, under and just outside the tree canopy. If digging, foot traffic, or vehicles injure roots then damage to the tree can range from slowed growth (minor) to the death of the tree (major!). Some trees, such as dogwoods, are very susceptible to root damage; others, like maples, are more tolerant.

**EDIBLES**

- Plant cool-weather vegetable crops such as lettuce, mustard greens, sugar snap peas, radishes, onions, potatoes, spinach, and cole crops (such as cabbage and collards) as soon as soil can be worked. [http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8016.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8016.html)
- If a ball of soil crumbles when squeezed in your fist, the soil is workable.
- Take a soil test (we have free kits here) to see how much fertilizer to apply around pecan trees. It's time!
- Beets, broccoli, cauliflower and Chinese cabbage can be started by the third or fourth week of March.
- Now is the time to start seeds indoors for vegetables such as tomato, pepper, eggplant, and others to get a jump-start on the summer growing season.

**WILDLIFE & INSECTS**

- Put up martin and bluebird houses by mid-March to encourage these birds to nest. Learn how to build a blue bird nest box at [nabluebirdsociety.org/ nestboxspecsh.htm](nabluebirdsociety.org/nestboxspecifics.htm) or [nabluebirdsociety.org/nestboxplans.htm](nabluebirdsociety.org/nestboxplans.htm)
- Clean out last year's birdhouse nesting materials to make them more attractive to house-hunting birds.

**LANDSCAPE IDEAS**

- Take photographs of your yard while your spring bulbs are blooming, so you can remember where to plant more bulbs in the fall.

**HOUSEPLANTS**

- Repot houseplants in fresh commercial potting mix.
- Before re-using old pots, clean them with detergent and water, or a 10% chlorine bleach solution, to remove salts and disease-causing microorganisms.
- Wait a month after repotting before fertilizing.