

A Beginner's Guide on How to Prepare a Garden Bed

Before you dig

- Choose a location: observe sun/shade patterns for a few days. (It will vary depending upon the season and if the trees are leafed out or are bare). Is it sunny in the morning or afternoon? Afternoon sun tends to be more intense than morning sun and may be too hot for some plants. Sunny= 6+ hrs. of sun/day.
- Have your soil tested at the Cornell Cooperative Extension office. Call for details at: 585-753-2550.

Plan

- Draw a diagram with measurements. Start small as you can always expand later.
- Outline the area: use white spray paint or hose. Keep changing the borders until you feel it is just right.
- Choose your plants: talk to nursery staff, visit public and private gardens and parks, talk to gardeners and look at garden magazines and websites.

Things to consider:

- What colors do you like? Stick with 2-4 colors for a cohesive-looking garden.
- Decide if you want seeds, bare roots, established plants or a mixture of some or all of these.
- Usually a mix of perennials (live 2+ years) and annuals (one season plants) works best.
- Find what plants are native to your area as they will do best with minimal need for fertilizers, excess watering or pesticides. [See native plant lists here.](#)
- Read plant labels and seed packet instructions and match the plants' requirements to your chosen location. Group plants with similar light and water requirements together. Learn the full height/ width of the plants at maturity as well as the spacing to avoid over-crowding.
- Decide on a budget and where you plan to get the plants: nurseries, big box stores, the Public Market or other local farm markets, from friends or other gardeners.
- Consider realistically how much time you have to devote to your garden.

Garden design

- In a round garden, the tallest plants are usually located in the middle and the plants generally decrease in height as you get closer to the outside edges of the bed.
- In a square garden or one that is located against a fence or other structure, the tallest plants are located in the back and then graduate down in size as you approach the front of the bed.

Take action

- Getting rid of sod- choose which method works best for you:
 - Slow method: pile newspapers 4-5 thick over the area where you want to kill the grass. Cover the newspapers with compost or black plastic. This method is best done in the fall so that the grass will be dead and the area will be ready to plant after the threat of frost has passed.
 - Fast method: Use a spade to dig up the sod.
- Gently till or scratch the soil and add 2-3" of well-rotted manure or compost (store-bought, from your local town hall or from your own compost pile). This adds nutrition and improves soil structure.
- Plant plants or sow seeds and then water. You will need to deep water the plants (about 1" per week- dependent upon how much rain you receive) until the plants are well-established the first season.
- Add mulch around the plants leaving a bare space a few inches away from the stem of the plants. This will reduce the amount of weeds growing in your garden, retain moisture and keep a neat appearance.
- Walk around your garden daily to observe your garden for signs of moisture needs or any damage.
- Manage weeds by pulling them daily or at least weekly.