

# Planning Your Garden

UConn Home and Garden Education Center

## ARTICLE BY SUSAN PELTON

March and early April in Connecticut are the times of year that we gardeners dream about through the long, cold winter. The temperatures are on the rise, the days are lengthening, the soil is workable, and even if we do receive a snowfall, it generally doesn't last for long. The Lenten rose, *Helleborus orientalis*, may be blooming and the crocus, grape hyacinth, daffodils are just waiting for the sun's heat to warm the ground so that they can send forth their new growth.

For me, this time of year is about planning this season's vegetable garden and getting a start on the growing season. It begins with plotting out the area allotted for our vegetable garden, which includes four raised beds. There are many ways to do a garden plan. The simplest way is to put pencil to paper and sketch out a rough drawing. If you enjoy employing the latest technology there are also apps such as the Garden Planner and websites like Seed Savers Exchange available to aid in plotting out your garden. Another format is to use graph paper to plot out the actual footage. This is the manner that I enjoy employing. With pencil, ink, and colored pencils, I draw the placement of this year's plantings. I refer to prior year's plans so that I can rotate varieties among

the beds as much as possible.

A 2 to 3 year rotation schedule is recommended for most crops although some diseases may survive in the soil, on plant debris or tools, or in containers for longer than that. Removing plant debris at the end of the growing season and sanitizing tools and pots with a 1:10 solution of bleach and water are of the utmost importance. The solanaceous crops including tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant and pepper share common insect and disease issues and should not be planted successively in the same place. Members of the cucurbit family, such as cucumbers and squash varieties, will share similar problems and so those should also be rotated if possible. This practice applies as well to the brassica family, which includes broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and kale. Look for resistant varieties and select healthy, disease-free transplants whenever possible.

Longer term perennial plantings such as asparagus, strawberries, raspberries, rhubarb, and chives are best placed around perimeters of the garden. East and south exposures are preferred as there they will not block the sun from other plantings. Asparagus will grow 6 to 8 feet tall as it matures and may continue to

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produce for 10 to 15 years so once it is planted, it will be there for many years.

So, with your plan in place, it's time to start planting. Among the many crops that enjoy a cool weather start are peas, spinach, kale, arugula, radishes, beets, bok choy, and carrots. These are all seeds that can be directly sown into the garden as soon as the soil is workable. A good test to tell if the soil is workable is to make a ball of soil in your hand. If it falls apart like cake crumbs it is ready for planting. If the soil is too wet, the ball stays together. Working the soil when it is too wet will ruin the structure of the soil and cause compaction.

It is no longer recommended that gardens be tilled each year. Tilling brings weed seeds to the surface where they will easily germinate and nobody wants more weeds. Tilling also breaks down the soil aggregates, those lovely clumps of organic soil structure that allow oxygen, water, and roots to move easily through the earth. As a rule of thumb, only till your garden when amendments like limestone, fertilizer or organic matter need to be added. Garden beds that are narrow enough so that plants can be worked and harvested easily without walking on them helps avoid soil compaction, or consider using

raised beds to avoid compaction altogether.

For information on starting seeds, vegetable gardening tips, or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.



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