

HOME VEGETABLE GARDENING

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Formerly it was the custom for gardeners to invest their labors and achievements with a mystery and secrecy which might well have discouraged any amateur from trespassing upon such difficult ground.

"Trade secrets" in either flower or vegetable growing were acquired by the apprentice only through practice and observation, and in turn jealously guarded by him until passed on to some younger brother in the profession. Every garden operation was made to seem a wonderful and difficult undertaking. Now, all that has changed. In fact the pendulum has swung, as it usually does, to the other extreme. Often, if you are a beginner, you have been flatteringly told in print that you could from the beginning do just as well as the experienced gardener.

My garden friend, it cannot, as a usual thing, be done. Of course, it may happen and sometimes does. You might, being a trusting lamb, go down into Wall Street with \$10,000 and make a fortune. You know that you would not be likely to; the chances are very much against you. This garden business is a matter of common sense; and the man, or the woman, who has learned by experience how to do something, whether it is cornering the market or growing cabbages, naturally does it better than the one who has not. Do not expect the impossible. No, if you are going to take up gardening, you will have to work, and you will have a great many disappointments. All that I, or anyone else, could put between the two

covers of a book will not make a gardener of you. It must be learned through the fingers, and back, too, as well as from the printed page. But, after all, the greatest reward for your efforts will be the work itself; and unless you love the work, or have a feeling that you will love it, probably the best way for you, is to stick to the grocery for your vegetables.

Most things, in the course of development, change from the simple to the complex. The art of gardening has in many ways been an exception to the rule. The methods of culture used for many crops are more simple than those in vogue a generation ago. The last fifty years has seen also a tremendous advance in the varieties of vegetables, and the strange thing is that in many instances the new and better sorts are more easily and quickly grown than those they have replaced. The new lima beans are an instance of what is meant. While limas have always been appreciated as one of the most delicious of vegetables, in many sections they could never be successfully grown, because of their aversion to dampness and cold, and of the long season required to mature them. The newer sorts are not only larger and better, but hardier and earlier; and the bush forms have made them still more generally available.

Knowledge on the subject of gardening is also more widely diffused than ever before, and the science of photography has helped wonderfully in telling the newcomer how to do things. It has also lent an impetus and furnished an inspiration which words alone could never have done. If one were to attempt to read all the gardening instructions and

suggestions being published, he would have no time left to practice gardening at all. Why then, the reader may ask at this point, another garden book? It is a pertinent question, and it is right that an answer be expected in advance. The reason, then, is this: while there are garden books in plenty, most of them pay more attention to the "content" than to the form in which it is laid before the prospective gardener. The material is often presented as an accumulation of detail, instead of by a systematic and constructive plan which will take the reader step by step through the work to be done, and make clear constantly both the principles and the practice of garden making and management, and at the same time avoid every digression unnecessary from the practical point of view. Other books again, are either so elementary as to be of little use where gardening is done without gloves, or too elaborate, however accurate and worthy in other respects, for an every-day working manual. The author feels, therefore, that there is a distinct field for the present book.

And, while I still have the reader by the "introduction" buttonhole, I want to make a suggestion or two about using a book like this. Do not, on the one hand, read it through and then put it away with the dictionary and the family Bible, and trust to memory for the instruction it may give; do not, on the other hand, wait until you think it is time to plant something, and then go and look it up. For instance, do not, about the middle of May, begin investigating how many onion seeds to put in a hill; you will find out that they should have been put in, in drills, six weeks before. Read the whole book through

carefully at your first opportunity, make a list of the things you should do for your own vegetable garden, and put opposite them the proper dates for your own vicinity. Keep this available, as a working guide, and refer to special matters as you get to them.

Do not feel discouraged that you cannot be promised immediate success at the start. I know from personal experience and from the experience of others that "book-gardening" is a practical thing. If you do your work carefully and thoroughly, you may be confident that a very great measure of success will reward the efforts of your first garden season. And I know too, that you will find it the most entrancing game you ever played.

Good luck to you!

CHAPTER II

WHY YOU SHOULD GARDEN

There are more reasons to-day than ever before why the owner of a small place should have his, or her, own vegetable garden. The days of home weaving, homecheese-making, home meat-packing, are gone. With a thousand and one other things that used to be made or done at home, they have left the fireside and followed the factory chimney. These things could be turned over to machinery. The growing of vegetables cannot be so disposed of.

Garden tools have been improved, but they are still the same old one-man affairs--doing one thing, one row at a time. Labor is still the big factor--and that, taken in combination with the cost of transporting and handling such perishable stuff as garden produce, explains why the home gardener can grow his own vegetables at less expense than he can buy them. That is a good fact to remember.

But after all, I doubt if most of us will look at the matter only after consulting the household budget. The big thing, the salient feature of home gardening is not that we may get our vegetables ten per cent cheaper, but that we can have them one hundred per cent better.

Even the long-keeping sorts, like squash, potatoes and onions, are very perceptibly more delicious right from the home garden, fresh from the vines or the ground; but when it comes to peas, and corn, and lettuce,--well, there is absolutely nothing to compare with the home garden ones, gathered fresh, in the early slanting sunlight, still

gemmed with dew, still crisp and tender and juicy, ready to carry every atom of savory quality, without loss, to the dining table. Stale, flat and unprofitable indeed, after these have once been tasted, seem the limp, travel-weary, dusty things that are jounced around to us in the back of a truck . It is not in price alone that makes home gardening pay. There is another point: the market gardener has to grow the things that give the biggest yield. He has to sacrifice quality to quantity. You do not.

One cannot buy Golden Bantam corn, or Mignonette lettuce, or Gradus peas in most markets. They are top quality, but they do not fill the market crate enough times to the row to pay the commercial grower. If you cannot afford to keep a professional gardener there is only one way to have the best vegetables--grow your own!

And this brings us to the third, and what may be the most important reason why you should garden. It is the cheapest, healthiest, keenest pleasure there is. Give me a sunny garden patch in the golden springtime, when the trees are picking out their new gowns, in all the various self-colored delicate grays and greens--strange how beautiful they are, in the same old unchanging styles, isn't it?--give me seeds to watch as they find the light, plants to tend as they take hold in the fine, loose, rich soil, and you may have the other sports. And when you have grown tired of their monotony, come back in summer to even the smallest garden, and you will find in it, every day, a new problem to be solved, a new campaign to be carried out, a new victory to win.

Better food, better health, better living--all these the home garden offers you in abundance. And the price is only the price of every worth-while thing--honest, cheerful patient work.

But enough for now of the dream garden. Put down your book. Put on your old clothes , and let's go outdoors and look the place over, and pick out the best spot for that garden-patch of yours.

CHAPTER III

REQUISITES OF THE HOME VEGETABLE GARDEN

In deciding upon the site for the home vegetable garden it is well to dispose once and for all of the old idea that the garden "patch" must be an ugly spot in the home surroundings. If thoughtfully planned, carefully planted and thoroughly cared for, it may be made a beautiful and harmonious feature of the general scheme, lending a touch of a comfortable home that no shrubs, borders, or flower beds can ever produce.

With this fact in mind we will not feel restricted to any part of the premises merely because it is out of sight behind the barn or garage. In the average moderate-sized place there will not be much choice as to land. It will be necessary to take what is to be had and then do the very best that can be done with it. But there will probably be a good deal of choice as to, first, exposure, and second, convenience. Other things being equal, select a spot near at hand, easy to access. It may seem that a difference of only a few hundred yards will mean nothing, but if one is depending largely upon spare moments for working in and for watching the garden--and in the growing of many vegetables the latter is almost as important as the former--this matter of convenient access will be of much greater importance than is likely to be at first recognized. Not until you have had to make a dozen time-wasting trips for forgotten seeds or tools, or gotten your feet soaking wet by going out through the dew-drenched grass, will you realize fully what this may mean.

EXPOSURE

But the thing of first importance to consider in picking out the spot that is to yield you happiness and delicious vegetables all summer, or even for many years, is the exposure. Pick out the "earliest" spot you can find--a plot sloping a little to the south or east, that seems to catch sunshine early and hold it late, and that seems to be out of the direct path of the chilling north and northeast winds. If a building, or even an old fence, protects it from this direction, your garden will be helped along wonderfully, for an early start is a great big factor toward success. If it is not already protected, a board fence, or a hedge of some low-growing shrubs or young evergreens, will add very greatly to its usefulness. The importance of having such a protection or shelter is altogether underestimated by the amateur.

THE SOIL

The chances are that you will not find a spot of ideal garden soil ready for use anywhere upon your place. But all except the very worst of soils can be brought up to a very high degree of productiveness--especially such small areas as home vegetable gardens require. Large tracts of soil that are almost pure sand, and others so heavy and mucky that for centuries they lay uncultivated, have frequently been brought, in the course of only a few years, to where they yield annually tremendous crops on a commercial basis. So do not be discouraged about your soil. Proper treatment of it is much more important, and a garden patch

of average run-down,--or "never-brought-up" soil--will produce much more for the energetic and careful gardener than the richest spot will grow under average methods of cultivation.

The ideal garden soil is a "rich, sandy loam." And the fact cannot be overemphasized that such soils usually are made, not found. Let us analyze that description a bit, for right here we come to the first of the four all-important factors of gardening--food. The others are cultivation, moisture and temperature. "Rich" in the gardener's vocabulary means full of plant food; more than that--and this is a point of vital importance--it means full of plant food ready to be used at once, all prepared and spread out on the garden table, or rather where growing things can at once make use of it; or what we term, in one word, "available" plant food. Practically no soils in longinhabited communities remain naturally rich enough to produce big crops. They are made rich, or kept rich, in two ways; first, by cultivation, which helps to change the raw plant food stored in the soil into available forms; and second, by fertilizing or adding plant food to the soil from outside sources.

"Sandy" in the sense here used, means a soil containing enough particles of sand so that water will pass through it without leaving it pasty and sticky a few days after a rain; "light" enough, as it is called, so that a handful, under ordinary conditions, will crumble and fall apart readily after being pressed in the hand. It is not necessary that the soil be sandy in appearance, but it should be friable.

"Loam: a rich, friable soil," says Webster. That hardly covers it, but it does describe it. It is soil in which the sand and clay are in proper proportions, so that neither greatly predominate, and usually dark in color, from cultivation and enrichment. Such a soil, even to the untrained eye, just naturally looks as if it would grow things. It is remarkable how quickly the whole physical appearance of a piece of well cultivated ground will change. One instance came about last fall in one of my gardens, where a strip had contained onions for two years, and a little piece jutting off from the middle of this had been prepared for them for just one season. The rest had not received any extra fertilizing or cultivation. When the garden was plowed up in the fall, all three sections were as distinctly noticeable as though they were separated by a fence. And I know that next springs crop of carrots, before it is plowed under, will show the lines of demarcation just as plainly.

This, then, will give you an idea of a good garden soil. Perhaps in yours there will be too much sand, or too much clay. That will be a disadvantage, but one which energy and perseverance will soon overcome to a great extent--by the methods you will be learning in Chapter VIII.

DRAINAGE

There is, however, one other thing you must look out for in selecting your garden site, and that is drainage. Dig down eight or twelve inches after you have picked out a favorable spot, and examine the sub-soil.

This is the second strata, usually of different texture and color from the rich surface soil, and harder than it. If you find a sandy or gravelly bed, no matter how yellow and poor it looks, you have chosen the right spot. But if it is a stiff, heavy clay, especially a blue clay, you will have to either drain it or be content with a very late garden--that is, unless you are at the top of a knoll or on a slope. Chapter VII contains further suggestions in regard to this problem.

SOIL ANTECEDENTS

There was a further reason for mentioning that strip of onion ground. It is a very practical illustration of what last year's handling of the soil means to this year's garden. If you can pick out a spot, even if it is not the most desirable in other ways, that has been well enriched or cultivated for a year or two previous, take that for this year's garden. And in the meantime have the spot on which you intend to make your permanent vegetable garden thoroughly "fitted," and grow there this year a crop of potatoes or sweet corn, as suggested in Chapter IX. Then next year you will have conditions just right to give your vegetables a great start.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

There are other things of minor importance but worth considering, such as the shape of your garden plot, for instance. The more nearly rectangular, the more convenient it will be to work and the more easily

kept clean and neat. Have it large enough, or at least open on two ends, so that a rototiller can be used in plowing and tilling. And if by any means you can have it within reach of an adequate supply of water, that will be a tremendous help in seasons of protracted drought. Then again, if you have ground enough, lay off two plots so that you can take advantage of the practice of rotation, alternating grass, potatoes or corn with the vegetable garden. Of course it is possible to practice crop rotation to some extent within the limits of even the small vegetable garden, but it will be much better, if possible, to rotate the entire garden-patch.

All these things, then, one has to keep in mind in picking the spot best suited for the home vegetable garden. It should be, if possible, of convenient access; it should have a warm exposure and be well enriched, well worked-up soil, not too light nor too heavy, and by all means well drained. If it has been thoroughly cultivated for a year or two previous, so much the better. If it is near a supply of water, so situated that it can be at least plowed and tilled with a rototiller, and large enough to allow the garden to be shifted every other year or two, still more the better.

Fill all of these requirements that you can, and then by taking full advantage of the advantages you have, you can discount the disadvantages. After all it is careful, persistent work, more than natural advantages, that will tell the story; and a good garden does not grow--it is made.

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