

## Starting A New Garden

Thinking about starting a garden in 2009 to help with your grocery bill? A lot of people have been coming by and asking all kinds of questions about this very subject. We taught 2 “sold out” classes in the fall about starting a new garden, and could probably teach 2 more this spring.

I’ll spend the next few weeks going over some basics to get you on the right foot to starting a small garden. My articles will be based on a 1500 square foot garden, one that is 50 feet long and 30 feet wide. In this 1500 square foot area, we can’t grow everything you’ll eat for the summer, but it’s a starting point. It is much better to do a small area right than a large area poorly. You can always expand it after a few years of success.

A food garden has some particular needs that must be met or your success will be marginal:  
Sun: Food gardens must have at least 10 hours of sun each day. What do I mean? Good intense sunlight from March through September that you can feel on your skin. Sunlight that is filtered through the trees is not good enough for most vegetables. The best sun exposure is from morning to early afternoon. Morning exposure dries the dew off the plants which assists in preventing diseases, and afternoon sun makes the miracle of photosynthesis work. I’m always asked what is the least amount of sun one can get by on, and the answer is 10 hours of continuous sun daily.

The plants must have enough sun to produce enough food for growth, and then extra for reproduction. The extra is what makes the fruit, seeds and all that other good stuff we eat. You can grow plants on a deck if that’s what it takes to get them in the sun’s path if you need to. I hope I’ve made my point...the sun is important!

Soil: There are many books written about soil quality in gardens. We’ll cover the points that are essential. If you want to spend January and February learning and reading on your own about gardening, concentrate on learning about the soil. I am absolutely convinced that if you invest your efforts in building great soil by continuously working it, it will improve and you will see a difference. A great productive garden will be your reward!

Where do you start with your soil? With a **soil test!** There is nothing more disheartening than to have a failure due to poor ph or nutrients, and our test will determine what ph and nutrients your soil needs to be successful. Please don’t attempt a home test kit, as they are very inaccurate and don’t do a good job telling you how to correct nutrient shortages in the soil. Soil testing through our lab costs \$8 for each sample, and it is worth having done every three years to see where you stand. Here’s how to do it: take a shovel, hoe, or trowel and a bucket and take a random path around your garden. Every 10 steps, reach down and get a bit of soil from 2 – 3 inches deep (that’s where the roots grow). Take 10 – 15 samples like this, and mix them thoroughly together in your bucket. Place one pint of this mixed soil into a Ziploc bag or jar, and bring it to us. We’ll take it from there!

When the results return to us, which takes about a week, I’ll look at them and make any recommendations for improvement. We will then mail the results to you, and you can begin the process of improving your soil. One more thing, if there is a problem spot in your garden or lawn, do a test on that part separately. This will reveal if there is something going on down below! That’s enough for the first week. Next week we’ll cover organic matter, cover crops, and tilling.

Soil testing is one of the many testing services that take place at our testing labs at the University of Georgia. Please call us at 706-253-8840 if you have any questions.