



SMART START GARDEN PLANNER

Your Step-by-Step
Guide to a Successful
Season

MEGAN CAIN

The Creative Vegetable Gardener



For Mark.

My favorite partner in all of life's colorful adventures, inside the garden and out.

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Smart Start Garden Planner: Your Step-by-Step Guide to a Successful Season

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Is this book for you?

Our community of gardeners is big and colorful, and it spans the entire globe. Some of us are planting avocado trees and picking limes for dinner in our own little tropical paradise, some of us have gardens that are covered in a deep layer of snow all winter long, and some of us are tending to our container gardens up on the 15th floor of a high rise.

We're an eclectic bunch!

But one thing that many of us have in common is that we care about getting results for our gardening efforts. We're not interested in bumbling our way through the process, wasting money and time as we go.

This sounds like you, doesn't it?

You love the idea of having a successful garden that feeds healthy food to you and your family. But you're incredibly busy with work, school, kids, family, cooking, and household chores and don't have endless hours to devote to gardening.

You're in the right place. This book will guide you through creating a clear plan for the upcoming gardening season that will help you get more from your garden, sooner. You'll skip over the common beginner mistakes and feel confident, prepared, and excited about your garden.

Garden planning may sound like a big task, but we're going to keep it practical, down-to-earth, and fun! You're not going to do anything that's too complicated or takes too much time. We're in it for the least amount of work possible that delivers the best results. I'm going to walk you through each step, and at the end of the workbook you'll have a personalized blueprint for what a successful season in your garden will look like.

If you're the kind of gardener who wants to give the gardening lifestyle a real try, honing and developing your skills so that you get the most from your garden, year after year, this book is for you.

Welcome!



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What is a smart garden?

It's a beautiful garden that yields lots of food for the least amount of time and money invested.

Does this sound impossible? Believe me, it's not.

Gardening is a lot of work—joyful work for sure—and I've met lots of gardeners over the years who aren't getting the most from their gardens. And if you're not seeing real results, well . . . gardening isn't as rewarding a pastime as it should be.

Your garden should add to your life by bringing you more of the things that breathe color into your days—things like food, beauty, health, pleasure, and joy. Not more of the things that bring you stress, like weeds, pests, and failing vegetable plants.

A smart garden is all about more of the former and way less of the latter.

So, how do you go about creating a smart garden?
By transforming yourself into a smart gardener.

And what's the first thing a smart gardener does? She plans her garden. The most successful gardeners I know take some time before the garden season begins to devise a simple plan for the year.

Smart garden planning is more than figuring out how much space you have or deciding where you're going to purchase your seeds and plants. It's a more holistic way of thinking about how you want to approach your garden each season.

In the following pages, you'll learn how to take a step back and look at this bigger picture by examining your weekly eating and shopping habits, imagining the pleasures you want your garden to bring to your life this year, and learning to look at each vegetable with a strategic eye.

So, cozy up in your favorite chair with a steaming hot cup of your favorite drink (hot chocolate with marshmallows? Black coffee? Tea made from dried herbs from your garden?) and immerse yourself in your hopes and dreams for this year's garden.

They really can come true. You just need to make a plan for them!

Megan





What Do You Want to Grow?

One of the most fun parts of the garden-planning process is thinking about what you want to grow in your garden this year. Most of us don't have enough room to grow everything we'd like, unless we have a mini-farm! Spend some time strategizing so you can get the most from your garden this season.

Instead of running out to the nursery on the first nice day of spring and throwing plants and seeds into your cart willy-nilly (I've been there!), be more deliberate in your choices this year. Before deciding what to grow, use the following questions to take a closer look at your family's eating habits and what you buy at the grocery store on a regular basis.

WHAT DO I WANT TO GROW?

What does my family eat and buy from the grocery store on a regular basis?

Which of these ingredients can I grow for myself?

What is most important for me to have fresh from my garden?

What foods taste noticeably better when I grow them myself? (If you don't know, which foods do you enjoy more from the farmers market as opposed to the grocery store?)

What special varieties do I want that are hard to find?

Which foods provide the highest value? What's expensive to buy or difficult to find in winter? (Examples: berries, red peppers, broccoli)

Are there foods that I want to preserve for winter eating? If so, what can I easily preserve? (Examples: tomato sauce, pesto, garlic)

What's grown well for me in the past? What have I seen growing well in my neighborhood, or received as excess from friends or coworkers?

What will make me happy to grow in my garden?



How Many Days Until You Get a Harvest?

To a certain extent, gardening feels like a waiting game. Once we get our plants and seeds into the ground, we immediately start looking forward to the day when we can harvest the food. But vegetables vary widely in the number of days they need to grow until we can harvest them for dinner.

Radishes are ready to eat in as little as 21 days, while Brussels sprouts can take up to 110 days. That's a huge difference! Part of strategically deciding what you want to grow in your garden is knowing the time investment for each vegetable.

QUICK TO HARVEST – Short-Season Vegetables

These vegetables go from seed or seedling to harvest size in 40 days or less, which is pretty quick in garden time! I like to plant as many of these vegetables as possible in early spring when I'm starved for fresh vegetables from the garden. I want a quick harvest!

They're also a fun choice for gardening with kids to reward their interest in gardening with a fast payback.

Short-season vegetables:

arugula, lettuce (head), radishes, salad mix, spinach, turnips

What does this mean for garden planning?

These vegetables do best in cooler weather, so they should be planted as early in the spring as possible. But if you plant only vegetables from this category, you'll have plenty of food to harvest in the beginning of the gardening season, but not much during the summer and early fall because they'll quit producing in the hot summer weather.

Many of the vegetables on this list can be replanted again in the late summer for fall and early winter harvest when the weather cools down again.



NOT SO QUICK TO HARVEST – Medium-Season Vegetables

These vegetables aren't as quick out of the starting gate as those above. You'll need to cultivate a little more patience while waiting for them to grow to harvest size. They're usually ready for the dinner table in 40-80 days. This is the largest category, and it features many of the late spring and mid-summer vegetables that we all know and love.

Medium-season vegetables:

beans (bush and pole), basil, beets, bok choy, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, cilantro, collards, corn, cucumber, dill, eggplant, fennel, kale, kohlrabi, okra, parsley, peas, peppers, potatoes, scallions, summer squash, swiss chard, tomatillos, tomatoes

What does this mean for garden planning?

This category makes up the bulk of what most of us grow in our gardens. If you grew only this category, you'd get the majority of your harvest during the summer. Try mixing in some short-season vegetables for food in the spring and long-season vegetables to extend the harvest into fall and early winter. This will give you a more well-rounded garden and a longer duration of harvests.

IT'S GOING TO TAKE A WHILE – Long-Season Vegetables

These vegetables are an investment in time, but often worth it.

They take their sweet time growing and developing, between 80–120 days until they're ready to harvest. These vegetables give us gardeners a new perspective on how long it actually takes to grow some of the food we see in the grocery store. Gardening requires a lot of patience!

Long-season vegetables:

asparagus, beans (dry), brussels sprouts, celery, dill (seed), edamame, garlic, leeks, melons, onions, parsnips, peppers (hot), potatoes, pumpkins, shallots, sweet potatoes, winter squash



What does this mean for garden planning?

If you grew only vegetables from this category, you'd have to wait until late summer and early fall before harvesting food from your garden. Mix in some short-and medium-season vegetables to ensure you have more months of harvests from your garden.

Dig In:

Take a look at the vegetables you selected on the **My Vegetable List** worksheet and see what harvest category they fall into. Make sure you're growing vegetables from all three categories.

You can now evaluate each vegetable according to all of the various characteristics we cover in this section. Use the **Veggie Essentials Cheat Sheet** at the back of the book to help you. Does the big picture effect which vegetables you'll choose to grow in your garden?

Planting for Beauty with Flowers

A common complaint about vegetables gardens is that they're not very attractive. I couldn't disagree more! At my house my vegetable gardens are front and center—an integral part of my home landscape.

Over the years I've learned I can have a garden that produces a lot of food and is also beautiful to look at. And you can, too!

The simplest thing you can do to elevate your garden from a place where you grow food to an attractive part of your overall home landscape is to add flowers. If you start your own vegetable seedlings at home, think about ordering some flower seed this year and starting them alongside the vegetables.

Or, make a visit to a local nursery in spring and buy a flat of colorful annual flowers. Annual flowers are the perfect companion to vegetables since they have a very similar lifespan. You can plant perennials in your vegetable garden, but keep in mind they will stay in place year after year and may be difficult to work around.

I like annuals because once they get going, they tend to bloom for most of the season, and then they die back with the first frosts. This allows me to clear them out of my garden at the same time I'm cleaning out my vegetable plants. An added benefit of planting flowers among your vegetables is their blooms will attract beneficial insects and pollinators, which are an important part of a balanced organic garden.

This season, reserve some space at the end of some of your garden beds and tuck some flowers in amongst the vegetables. And don't be afraid to mix and match flowers; the color combinations add an extra layer of beauty and interest to your vegetable garden.

Six Favorite Flowers for the Vegetable Garden

Shopping for flowers for your vegetable garden can be as simple as taking a trip to your local nursery and seeing what catches your eye. I usually buy a flat of mixed annuals each spring and spread them throughout my garden. I have a list of favorite annuals I always grow, and then I experiment with new varieties I pick up from the nursery each season in the hopes of finding my new favorite flower!



State Fair Zinnia



Lady in Red Salvia



Blue Victoria Salvia



Prairie Sun Rudbeckia



Verbena Bonariensis



Strawberry Fields Globe Amaranth



Keeping Records Makes You a Better Gardener

When I first started gardening, I'd stick the little variety marker right in the soil of the garden next to the plant after I planted a seedling. Of course, by the end of the season, the tag would disappear or fade from the sun and then I wouldn't know which plant was which variety. I'd feel frustrated when there was a pepper that I loved and wanted to grow again, or a tomato that didn't produce well that I would rather not grow next year, but I'd have no idea what they were because the tag was gone.

One day while working in my garden, I was struck by a genius idea: “I should make a map of my garden!” I exclaimed to myself. I ran back to my house, grabbed a piece of paper from the printer and a pencil, and then stood at the entrance to my garden and sketched a quick map of the garden beds.

Then, I went over the lines with a sharpie marker, made a copy, and wrote the current year on the top of the map. After that, each time I planted something in my garden I wrote down the date, variety, and how much I planted. I didn't have to worry about the tags disappearing or losing track of what I planted ever again!

After several years of keeping simple records, I realized that I was reducing the amount of guesswork that went into my garden each season. My records began to show me the way to a more efficient and productive garden. I learned important things like 220 garlic plants were the perfect amount to provide us with plenty to use throughout the winter, eight basil plants made all the pesto I needed for the year, and seven kale plants allowed me to make as many massaged kale salads as my heart desired.

I didn't have to guess anymore about how many plants I might need each season. I simply consulted my records and made an educated decision. I trimmed the fat from my garden and I stopped wasting time and money planting things I didn't use, didn't like, or that didn't perform well.

I also started to hone in on the best time to plant different vegetables. Because I've kept track of the date when I plant my fall spinach each year, I know the sweet spot for planting is the third week in August. That's the planting time that does the best from year to year.

Having a garden map and keeping simple records helps you become a better gardener over time. You train yourself to pay attention to what's happening in the garden and that knowledge assists your learning and skill building from year to year.



VEGGIE ESSENTIALS CHEAT SHEET

Veggie	Harvest Season	How much food will I harvest?	How big do the plants grow?	How many days until I get a harvest
Arugula	Spring Fall	Short Harvest 1-2 cuttings/week	Small	Short, 21-40 days
Asparagus	Spring	Short Harvest 1+ lb. per plant	Medium, Grows in clusters of spears	Long, 3-4 years to start harvesting
Beans, Fresh	Summer Fall	Short Harvest (Bush) 2-3 weeks of harvest per planting Long Harvest (Pole) Many weeks of harvest as plant puts on new growth	Medium (Bush) Large (Pole)	Medium, 50-65 days
Beans, Dry	Summer Fall	Short Harvest Small handful per plant	Medium (Bush) Large (Pole)	Long, 90-105 days
Beets	Spring Summer Fall Winter	Plant One— Harvest One	Medium	Medium, 45-60 days
Bok Choy	Spring Fall	Plant One— Harvest One	Medium	Medium, 45-60 days
Broccoli	Spring Fall	Plant One— Harvest One	Medium	Medium, 50-75 days
Brussels Sprouts	Fall Winter	Short Harvest 1+ lbs per plant	Large, Tall	Long, 90-110 days
Cabbage	Spring Summer Fall	Plant One— Harvest One	Large, Wide	Medium, 65-105 days
Carrots	Summer Fall Winter	Plant One— Harvest One	Medium	Medium, 50-80 days
Cauliflower	Spring Fall	Plant One— Harvest One	Medium	Medium, 50-80 days
Celery	Summer Fall	Plant One—Harvest One/ Long Harvest 1 bunch per plant	Medium	Long, 85 days

Direct Seed or Transplant	Favorite Varieties*	Garden Planning Notes
DS	Astro	Planted in early spring and again for fall. Bolts in hot weather. Often grows better in fall due to the cooler weather.
T	Jersey Knight	Buy crowns from a seed catalog or local nursery. Perennial that takes 3-4 years to establish. Lives up to 25 years.
DS	Maxibel Dragon Tongue Trilogy	Kids love Dragon Tongue beans! Trilogy is a mix of green, purple and yellow beans.
DS	Cherokee Trail of Tears Vermont Cranberry	Dry beans need to be left on the plant until they're completely dry; this is often at the end of the season.
DS	Red Ace Early Wonder Tall Top	Try growing Touchstone Gold and Chioggia varieties.
DS or T	Joy Choi	Great for a quick spring crop. Grow as baby greens or a full head.
T	Spring: Gypsy Fall: Arcadia, Marathon	There are different varieties for spring, summer and fall plantings. Read the descriptions.
T	Gustus Nautic Diablo	Can be challenging if you don't grow the right variety for your garden. Keep experimenting!
T	Ruby Perfection Tendersweet	Grow a mix of purple and green cabbages.
DS	Bolero Yellow Sun Deep Purple	Mix yellow, purple, and orange seeds together in one bed to get a fun mix of colors.
T	Bishop	Can be difficult to grow. Success is very variety dependent.
T	Tango	Can be tougher than grocery store celery. Freeze for winter soups. You can harvest the whole bunch at once, or pick stalks individually.

A fresh and simple approach to planning your garden.



Your garden should add to your life by bringing you more of the things that breathe color into your days—things like food, beauty, health, pleasure, and joy. And less of the things that bring you stress, like weeds, pests, and failing vegetable plants.

The most successful gardeners take some time before the garden season begins to devise a simple and smart plan for the year. A smart garden plan lays the groundwork for a beautiful garden that yields lots of food for the least amount of time and money invested.

This workbook keeps planning practical, down-to-earth, and fun! You'll work through your plan step-by-step, and at the end you'll have a personalized blueprint for what a successful season in your garden looks like.

Your garden dreams really can come true . . . you just have to plan for them!

This is such a helpful book! The way you write about gardening is encouraging me to think about it in a new and fresh way. As the season gets closer it's motivating me and getting me excited about planning my garden!

—Patricia Espedal

This is a wonderful book and exactly the resource I've been looking for to help me become a better gardener.

—Rebecca Bernstein



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