



**Virginia Green Industry Council**

For Immediate Use

Contact: Virginia Green Industry Council

540-382-0943

Electronic Version:

[www.viriniagreen.org](http://www.viriniagreen.org)

## **Growing Better Foods**

Maybe this is the year you are finally going to plant that small vegetable or fruit garden you have so often considered starting. Backyard farming can have many rewards, according to Lin Diacont, President of the Virginia Green Industry Council. All it requires is a plan, some preparation and planting, and little maintenance to harvest the bounty.

If space is limited, you can still have some vegetable gardening with a very small plot. Raised beds, plant containers and window boxes allow even apartment dwellers to enjoy fresh produce all year. Or consider renting a small tract or planting your crops in a community garden.

Begin with a garden plan sketched to scale on paper to insure maximum use of space. Start with a garden about 3 by 10 feet if you are a beginner so that you are not overwhelmed by the choices and work. Plant rows running north and south to prevent the tallest vegetables from shading other crops. Tall vegetables like corn and beans grown on a trellis should be on the north side of the garden.

Prepare the soil well by adding plenty of organic material like peat moss, leaf mold or compost and working it in to a depth of 6-8 inches. Remove any stones, twigs or debris. Take a soil test to determine the pH level. Correct with lime to raise it or with sulfur to lower it.

Choose only a few of your favorite vegetables. Plant the fast-maturing ones two weeks apart so you will be harvesting your produce all summer and not all in one week. To increase garden production, try interplanting. Plant rows of fast growing vegetables between rows of slow growing ones. All the crops are planted at once, but they will mature at different times. Plant lettuce, spinach or radishes between slower crops like tomatoes or cucumbers. The speedy ones will be ready to harvest just about the time the slow ones are big and need more room.

Harvest vegetables at their peak of ripeness for the best flavor and the most nutrients. Harvest broccoli just before the buds begin to open. Cut off the stem 6 inches below the main cluster and the side branches will develop smaller broccoli heads later in the season. Early potatoes can be harvested when the plants begin to flower. Dig mature potatoes when the tops have turned brown and died. Avoid injury to tubers by digging carefully. Store in a cool dry place around 36 degrees. Harvest tomatoes regularly to stimulate additional production. Harvest within 5 to 8 days after they are fully colored for peak quality. They lose their firmness quickly if they are overripe.

Fruit trees can be a beautiful and bountiful addition to your landscape. Select a variety that is the right size for your yard. Some fruit trees need to be planted in pairs to cross pollinate. Others will pollinate themselves. Check with your nursery owner for advice on selecting the right varieties for your area. To get the fruit tree off to a good start, plant in a sunny spot with well-drained soil. Prune at planting time. Select 3 to 5 of the strongest branches and prune them back by one-third, leaving the central branch a little longer than the others. Cut off the remaining branches.

Planting a vegetable or fruit garden is probably easier than you thought. It's fun, good exercise and the results can be quite tasty.

More gardening information is available at [www.VirginiaGardening.com](http://www.VirginiaGardening.com)

The Virginia Green Industry Council is the voice of the horticulture industry in the Commonwealth and is dedicated to enhancing the beauty of the state's environment, the well-being of our citizens, improving our state's economy, and improving the health and wellness for everyone in Virginia. The Council is made up of providers and consumers of horticultural products and services. The Council works to provide public and industry education, environmental guidelines and other information that will keep Virginia green and growing. For more information, visit [www.viriniagreen.org](http://www.viriniagreen.org). 540-382-0943 FAX: 540-382-2716

E-mail:[info@viriniagreen.org](mailto:info@viriniagreen.org)

Virginia Green Industry Council  
383 Coal Hollow Rd  
Christiansburg, VA 24073-6721