



Beat High Food Costs - Start a Vegetable Garden!

In these times, one thing that is clear is that the high cost of gasoline, and therefore transportation, will result in rising food costs for consumers, since more than 80% of our food comes from out-of-state sources. Many people are re-examining their life styles and are planning ways to compensate for these cost increases. One way to save money is to grow your own vegetables. Even a small garden can result in a net gain once costs of seed, plants, fertilizer, and other materials are factored in. That's essentially money earned that can pay for many gallons of gasoline.

You may be thinking of starting or expanding a vegetable garden. Here's what to do:

1. Collect a soil sample from the area to be planted to vegetables. For information on collecting samples and having soil tested, go to the UMass Soils Lab web site at <http://www.umass.edu/soiltest/>. A standard soil test is required since you'll need to know soil pH and the levels of phosphorous and potassium. These are three factors that can be adjusted this fall during soil preparation.
2. Strip off any grass or sod that covers the garden site. Since grasses that make up sod and lawns are perennial, they must be removed. Otherwise, they'll pose a chronic weed problem.
3. Spread ground limestone and fertilizer as recommended by the soil test. Without a soil test, these applications are merely guess work. If guessing is to be done, apply 50 to 75 pounds of ground limestone per thousand square feet of soil. Also, spread 10 to 20 pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer per thousand square feet. These levels would not be excessive unless the site has been limed and fertilized regularly over the past several years. To be sure and to be safe, go with the soil test.
4. Apply compost, manure, or other organic matter to the soil surface. The amount to use is not critical. Generally, a two inch deep layer of compost worked into the top six inches of soil will provide good tilth, that is, the physical condition of soil that relates to the ease of tilling. Greater amounts of organic matter can be applied if the soil is either sandy or high in clay content, or if the depth of tilling is greater than six to eight inches. It is not necessary to use composted manure or finished compost now since there is plenty of time for the organic matter to decompose before spring planting. However, do avoid using wood chips, saw dust, or other organic materials that are very slow to decompose.
5. Turn over the soil to incorporate limestone, fertilizer, and organic matter. With a small garden, this can be done with a spade or spading fork. On larger sites, it may be necessary to use a power tiller. If using the latter, don't overdue the tilling since this will break down the physical structure of the soil leaving very fine particles on the soil surface. These will be subject to wind and water erosion through the fall, winter, and early spring. A coarse, uneven surface is best since it will capture rainfall and melting snow rather than have it run over the surface. A planting

of winter rye as a cover crop will help reduce erosion and add additional organic matter if it can be done early in October.

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