

Tips for a Successful Rental Garden Season

Whether you are new to the Waukesha County Rental Garden or looking for ways to improve your garden from last year, here are a few tips to help your gardening season be successful.

Choose Your Vegetables Wisely. Some vegetables are easier to manage than others. Cherry Tomatoes, for example, are prolific but once they are producing you will need to visit the garden daily or every other day to harvest. Some take up a lot of space (i.e., pumpkins), while others do not (i.e., peppers). If you're not sure what to plant and when, check out the *Southeast Wisconsin Vegetable Gardening Planting Schedule*. The Schedule can be found on our Yard & Garden Resources webpage at www.waukeshacounty.gov/UWEX/HORT/YG/.



Soil Amendments. We do not add anything to the soil to improve it, so you may want to consider doing so. Adding well-decomposed compost and other organic material either before planting or at planting time will improve the soil. Returning gardeners are given the same plot each year (unless a change is requested), so you can also add compost or other organic matter (such as leaves) at the end of the gardening season to benefit your garden next year. (Plowed garden plots are generally in the same place each year.)



Garden centers sell bags of compost. If you are on a limited budget, only add compost to the rows where you will be planting (vs the pathways in your garden). Your local municipality may have free compost piles for the public; however, some municipal compost may contain persistent weed seeds or chemicals from yard waste. Ask your local municipality about their compost management process and how they handle yard waste.

Fencing. You may notice that many gardeners put up a fence to prevent critters from helping themselves to the vegetables. Your garden area may be visited by groundhogs, rabbits, racoon, turkey, field mice, and deer. If you are going to put in the work of adding a fence to your garden, make sure you choose and install your fencing wisely.

Fence holes. Choose a fence either plastic or chicken wire that has small holes (one inch or less). The holes in orange snow fences are too big to be effective.

Bottom of fence. Consider burying the bottom of the of the fence or stake it down to discourage wildlife from entering your garden under the fence. Having your fence bottom buried or staked down may discourage wildlife from burrowing under your fence or at least they will have to work harder to get at your vegetables.

Height of fence. Most fences in the rental gardens are about 3 to 4 feet, but some are higher. A fence of 2.5 feet may keep out the rabbits but not much more. The higher the fence, the better.





Water. Rarely does the weather provide adequate or regular rainfall for most plants to thrive, so supplemental watering will be needed. Most plants prefer approximately one inch of water each week. Watering when the soil is just starting to get dry is better than waiting until your plants show signs of drought stress (i.e., wilting). Drought stress can slow down normal growth and result in smaller fruit or no fruit. Direct the water to the soil and plants roots rather than watering from the top over plants.

Weeds. To keep weeds under control, plan to weed regularly. Once weeds get out of hand, it can be overwhelming to control them. A thin layer of newspaper with mulch on top can be a great weed inhibitor. (See mulch information below.)

Mulch. Mulch conserves moisture between watering, keeps down weed growth, helps reduce some plant diseases, and keeps veggies clean since they are not resting on the soil surface. Straw, hay, untreated grass clippings, pine needles, and compost can be used for mulch. These organic mulch options do not need to be removed at the end of the garden season. They will also add organic matter and nutrients to your garden soil as they decomposes. Wood chips are best used only for paths or along the borders of your garden, not around your vegetables.



Using non-organic mulches like plastic may seem like the answer for weed control, but it can be expensive, cumbersome to put down, and must be removed at the end of the gardening season. Sun, rain, and wind can breakdown the materials making it difficult to remove in one piece at the end of the growing season. Even small bits left in the garden causes damage to the tractor/plow.

Go Vertical! Consider growing some of your vine vegetables vertically vs letting them roam free and take up valuable garden space. Options include staking, caging, or trellising some of your vegetables. Unless you have a **very** sturdy fence, do not use the fence as a trellis. It can flop over into other plots and block the walking paths. Check out the UW-Madison Extension Learning Store publication A3933-01 “Trellising, Staking, and Caging – Vertical Gardening Techniques for Vine-Type Vegetables.” See the link *Extension Horticulture Publications* on our Yard & Garden Resources web page – www.waukeshacounty.gov/UWEX/HORT/YG/.



Flowers. Flowers can add color and attract pollinators to your garden. You often see zinnias or marigolds at the garden. These are most likely chosen since they bloom all season long.

Be a Good Neighbor. Schedule time to care of your plot. Plan to control the weeds and garden paths surrounding your garden. Take time to introduce yourself to the other gardeners. Many gardeners love sharing their wealth of gardening knowledge with others.