



Garden Tips: Garden Planning

The thick blanket of snow outside makes it hard to imagine summertime. Plucking heavy tomatoes from the vine, or sweating through an afternoon trellising or weeding seems like worlds away! But the summer will of course come again, no matter how far off it seems today. And now is the perfect time to cozy up with a cup of tea, some seed catalogs and perhaps notes from this year's garden, and plan for the growing season ahead!

Taking some time now to think through your garden plans makes a successful garden more likely. We've found a great little [garden planning tool](#) that can help you think through all of the possibilities. Choose from pre-planned garden styles like "Kitchen Herb," "High Yield," "Plant It and Forget It," and "Fun for Kids." Or, design your own from scratch. The handy tool helps you create schematics of your garden beds, drawn out by the square foot. Add or edit vegetables, herbs, or fruits, as you see fit, and read the information below the bed for more information about each crop.

The tool mentions whether a crop is perennial (will last for many years) or annual (will only last for a season), and whether and when you should transplant or direct seed. Keep in mind that the planning tool assumes you've got great soil! Make plans to amend your garden with plenty of compost for good results. Also, consider getting a soil test if you haven't already, to determine more specifically what your garden soil needs.

Here's some other info we thought may be helpful as you think through your garden space:

- Pittsburgh is located in Zone 6b (this is 2012 data – zoning has been changing due to climate change)
- Last frost date in the city is usually in early-mid May. The first frost date is generally in mid-October.
- The garden planning tool does not delve into variety suggestions. For some possibilities, check out our archived Urban Harvester post from Dec. 19, 2012.
- Some crops can be planted twice in the same spot, during the same year. For instance, spinach likes cool weather, grows in a fairly short season, and therefore can be planted in both spring and fall. This is called succession planting, and can be a good method for maximizing space.
- This garden tool is based around planting a certain number of plants per square foot. Some plants may do better with more room. For instance, most tomato plants should be spaced at least 1.5 feet apart for optimal growth. Squash and cucumbers also like more room. Consider giving these larger plants a bit more room than the tool suggests.

One other consideration in these winter months is preparing to take notes about your upcoming garden. Take a little time to determine what information you think would be most helpful to have in the future, and get a notebook, calendar, or garden journal ready.

If you've got lots of time to spend in the garden, you may want to record everything from weather data to every task accomplished in the garden. If you barely have any time to spend, just keeping your seed packets and writing down planting dates may be the most information you'll be able to record. Here is a general list of information that can be helpful in future years. Pick and choose whatever you think would be most helpful to you.

- Crop variety names and performance
- Seeding/planting dates
- Date of first harvest
- Dates of first and last frosts
- Pest and disease problems
- Beneficial insects seen
- Soil test results and any amendments added
- Significant weed problems
- Weather conditions
- Amount of time spent in the garden
- Yields (by the pound, bunch, or piece)
- Amount of water used
- Financial records
- Photos