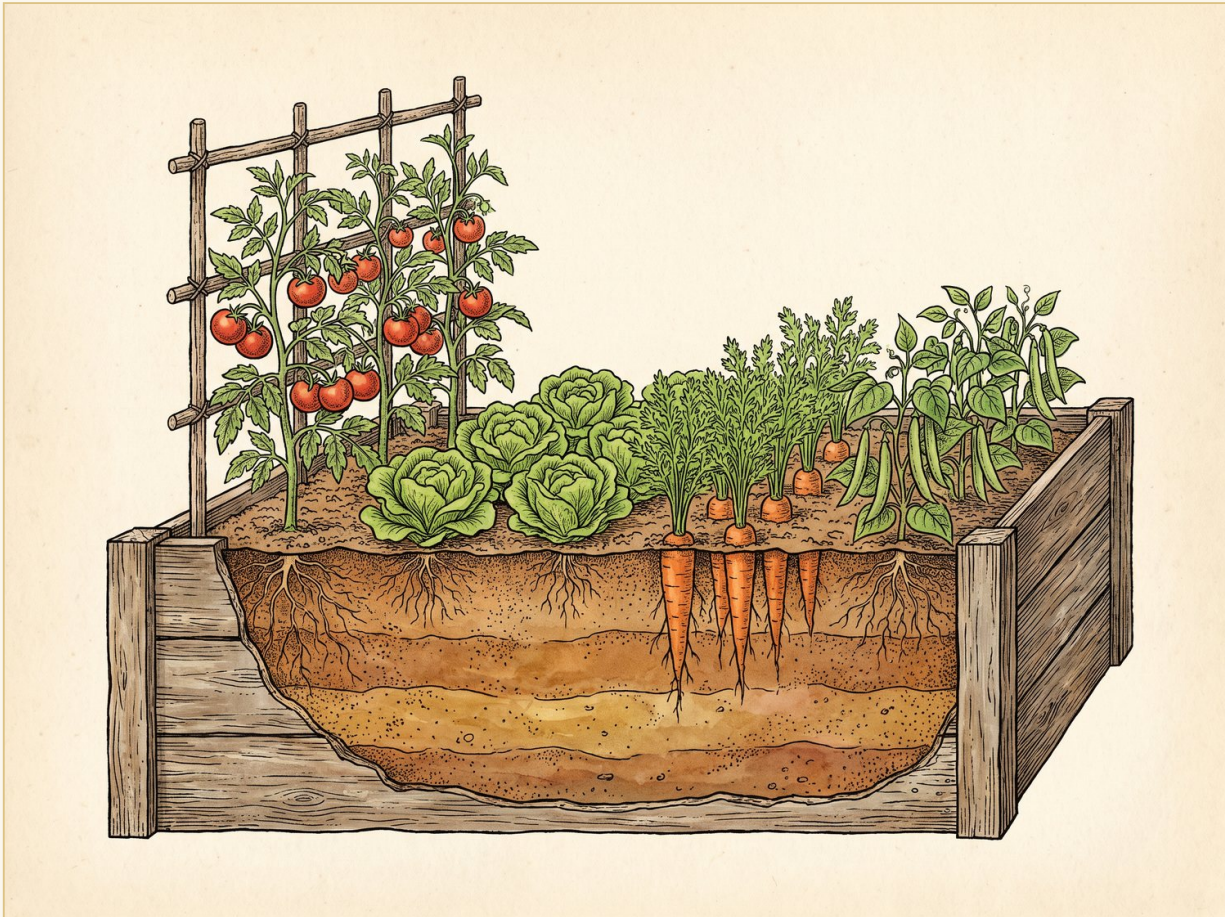


WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Vegetable Garden & Growing

Raised beds, heirloom seeds and soil that feeds itself



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

*Here in Christiana, Lancaster County, we grow a lot of our own food: tomatoes by the bushel, a long row of beans, a fruit orchard that never quite stops giving, and jars lining the cellar shelves by October. We don't do it because it's trendy. We do it because knowing exactly where your food came from, with **no mystery ingredients**, is a kind of security you can't buy at a checkout line. Plants want to grow, soil wants to be fed, and almost every mistake is something you get to try again next season. This guide is for first-time and returning growers in our part of Pennsylvania (mostly hardiness zone 7a on the 2023 USDA map), and it's written to be useful whenever you pick it up. Reading in fall? Good news: there's plenty to do right now, from planting garlic to sowing a soil-building cover crop. Start with the Quick Start, keep your first garden small, and let it grow with you.*

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

This is a first-weekend plan for a brand-new vegetable garden. Plan about a Saturday and a Sunday, and take it in order. Every step is something you can finish in an hour or two, and by Sunday evening you'll have a real garden in the ground, not just a good intention.

1. **Pick your spot by walking the yard, not by guessing.** Most vegetables want **6 to 8 or more hours** of direct sun a day. Note where the sun lands at 9 a.m., noon and 3 p.m., and choose the sunniest, flattest ground within hose reach of a spigot. Leafy greens tolerate less. Stay clear of black walnut trees, whose roots release a compound (juglone) that stunts tomatoes and peppers.
2. **Write down your two numbers: your zone and your last frost date.** Your **hardiness zone** is a map-based rating of how cold your winters get; Lancaster County is mostly zone 7a on the current (2023) USDA map, up from 6b on the older 2012 map. Your **last frost date** is the typical date of the final spring freeze, and it's the starting gun for most planting decisions. The National Weather Service puts Lancaster County's median last freeze around April 11, and light frosts can still come into early May; check your local date, since valleys and hilltops differ. Start a garden notebook and record both.
3. **Order a soil test.** It reports your soil's pH (how acidic or alkaline it is) and what nutrients are missing, and it takes one to three weeks, so order it first. Your county Penn State Extension office can explain how to take a sample. For most vegetables the sweet spot is **pH 6.0 to 7.0**.
4. **Build or place your first raised bed.** A bed **4 feet wide** lets you reach the center from either side without stepping on the soil, and **6 to 12 inches deep** gives roots room (12 or more for carrots and other root crops). A pre-made raised bed kit is the fastest way to start: it arrives cut and ready to assemble in under an hour. Set it on level ground and lay plain cardboard (tape and labels removed) inside to smother grass and weeds.
5. **Fill the bed with a good blend.** A 4×8-foot bed that's 12 inches deep holds about **32 cubic feet, just over 1 cubic yard**. A reliable blend is roughly equal parts quality topsoil, finished compost and an aeration component such as pine bark fines or coarse perlite. Don't stomp it down; loose soil is happy soil. Water well to settle it, then top off any dips.
6. **Set up your watering.** A soaker hose or drip line on a simple timer is the best gift you can give your future self. Add a cheap rain gauge, because the target is **about 1 inch of water per week** from rain and watering combined.
7. **Plant something that fits the season you're in.** Early spring: peas, lettuce, spinach, radishes. After the last frost: beans, squash, cucumbers, tomato and pepper transplants. Summer: bush beans and the start of fall crops. Fall: garlic and a cover crop. To **direct sow** means to plant seeds right in the bed where they'll grow; to **transplant** means to move a young plant started elsewhere into the bed.
8. **Mulch right away.** Spread **2 to 3 inches** of straw, shredded leaves or untreated wood chips around plants, keeping it an inch away from stems. Use only pet-safe mulch: never cocoa bean mulch, which is toxic to dogs.

9. **Start your compost.** Put a closed bin or tumbler in a corner of the yard and a lidded bucket by the kitchen sink. Fruit and vegetable scraps, coffee filters, eggshells and fall leaves are the beginning of next year's free fertilizer.
10. **Do a pet-safe walkthrough.** Put your vet's number, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, (888) 426-4435, and the Pet Poison Helpline, (855) 764-7661, on the fridge. Move bagged fertilizer, slug bait and garden chemicals to a high, closed shelf, and check every plant in your yard against the ASPCA's searchable toxic plant list.

First-Time Starter Bundle

What needs to be in the shed on day one, and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **A raised bed kit or the lumber to build one** — 4 feet wide, 6 to 12 inches deep, in untreated rot-resistant wood such as cedar or a modern low-toxicity treated lumber. A single 4×8 bed is plenty for a first season.
- **Bulk fill for the bed** — quality topsoil, finished compost and an aeration component (pine bark fines or coarse perlite), delivered by the cubic yard or bagged.
- **A soil test kit** — a mail-in lab test is best for accurate pH and nutrient numbers; a simple home pH kit is a useful backup.
- **A soaker hose or drip line on a timer, or a hose with a gentle wand** — for deep watering at the base of plants.
- **A rain gauge** — makes the 1-inch-a-week target easy to track.
- **A hand trowel, a hand fork and bypass pruners** — sturdy, with comfortable handles. A good trowel will outlast the garden.
- **Garden gloves** — snug-fitting, breathable and washable.
- **Mulch** — straw, shredded leaves or untreated wood chips, enough to cover the bed 2 to 3 inches deep.
- **Seeds and starter plants** — heirloom (open-pollinated) varieties of easy crops: lettuce, radishes, bush beans, cherry tomatoes, zucchini and herbs.
- **Plant markers and a waterproof pen** — you will forget what you planted where, we promise.
- **A trellis, stakes or tomato cages** — to hold up tomatoes, cucumbers and peas.
- **Floating row cover** — lightweight fabric that lets in light and water but keeps out insects and softens a surprise frost.
- **A compost bin and a lidded kitchen scrap bucket** — a tumbler or closed bin, so dogs and wildlife can't get in.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: Raised Bed Gardening, Gardening tools and supplies and Composting Supplies.

Enrichment

- **A heat mat and a basic grow light** — if you want to start tomatoes, peppers and flowers from seed indoors, these make germination and sturdy seedlings dependable, even without a sunny south window.
- **Seed-starting trays and fine seed-starting mix** — sterile, light and made for seedlings; garden soil is too heavy and can carry disease.
- **Pollinator flower seeds** — zinnias, cosmos, calendula and sunflowers bring in bees and beneficial insects. Check each against the ASPCA list if pets use the yard.
- **Jars, lids and freezer containers** — for putting food by when the harvest peaks.
- **A hand file or sharpening stone and an oily rag** — for the 15-minute tool reset described later in this guide.

Enrichment, one click away. Shop Heirloom Seeds and Seed Starting Supplies.

SECTION 2

Meet Your Garden

A vegetable garden is a living system, not a project with a finish line. Over a season you'll be growing soil as much as vegetables: feeding it, shading it, rotating what grows in it, and letting it rest. In south-central Pennsylvania we're lucky. We have a long, generous growing season, rainfall that's usually decent, and a farming heritage that means someone near you has probably already grown whatever you're attempting.

At a glance	Detail
Where we're growing	Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and similar parts of south-central PA
Hardiness zone	Mostly 7a (2023 USDA map; 6b on the older 2012 map)
Typical growing season	About 200 days between the median last and first freezes
Beginner-friendly bed size	One 4×8-foot raised bed (32 square feet) or two 4×4 beds
Time commitment	About 15 to 30 minutes most days; a few hours on planting and harvest weekends
Sun needed	6 to 8+ hours of direct sun for most crops
Water needed	About 1 inch per week , from rain plus watering
Best soil pH	6.0 to 7.0 for most vegetables
Biggest first-year lesson	Start small, mulch early, water deeply, and keep a notebook

What to expect in your first year

Early crops like radishes and lettuce will reward you in a month, a wonderful confidence builder. Tomatoes and peppers take until midsummer. Some things will fail: a row of carrots won't come up, a zucchini will wilt overnight, a rabbit will find your lettuce. That's not failure; that's gardening. Keep a notebook of what you planted, when, and how it did, and by year two you'll be growing off your own experience instead of the seed packet's. Grow a little of a lot of easy things, and plenty of what your family actually eats.

Zone and frost dates

Your **last spring frost date** and **first fall frost date** are averages, which means about half of years will see a frost after the "last" date and half before. Treat these dates as a guide and watch the ten-day forecast. The table gives typical ranges for Lancaster County; check your own local numbers with your county Extension office or a frost-date lookup tool, because valleys, hilltops and river towns can differ by weeks.

Garden marker	Typical for Lancaster County	What it means
USDA hardiness zone	Mostly 7a (2023 USDA map)	Average winter lows of about 0 to 5°F; sets which perennials, fruit trees and overwintering crops survive
Cool-season crops go in	Mid-March to mid-April	Peas, spinach, lettuce, radishes and brassicas tolerate light frost
Median last spring freeze	Around April 11 (light frost possible into early May)	Start counting back for seed starting and forward for warm-season planting

Garden marker	Typical for Lancaster County	What it means
Warm-season crops go out	Early to mid-May, once nights hold above about 50°F	Tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers and beans want warm soil and warm nights
Median first fall freeze	Around November 1 (light frost possible from mid-October)	Ends tender crops; cool-season crops carry on
Hard freeze (28°F or lower)	Usually November	Ends nearly everything above ground except hardy greens and roots

Your first easy crops

These are the beginner-friendly crops we recommend over and over, because they forgive mistakes and pay you back quickly.

Crop	Season	How to start	Typical days to harvest	Why it's easy
Lettuce and salad greens	Cool	Direct sow or transplant	30 to 55	Cut-and-come-again; tolerates partial shade
Radishes	Cool	Direct sow	25 to 30	Fastest reward; great for kids
Peas	Cool	Direct sow, 1 inch deep	55 to 70	Climb a simple trellis
Kale	Cool, frost-hardy	Transplant or direct sow	55 to 75	Productive for months; sweetens after frost
Bush beans	Warm	Direct sow after soil reaches about 60°F	50 to 60	No trellis, heavy yields
Zucchini	Warm	Direct sow or transplant	45 to 60	Two plants feed a family
Cucumbers	Warm	Direct sow or transplant	50 to 70	Trellis saves space; lots of fruit
Cherry tomatoes	Warm	Transplant	60 to 75 after transplanting	Forgiving, quick to ripen, rarely crack
Herbs (basil, chives, parsley, thyme)	Varies	Transplant or direct sow	30 to 60	Small harvests that make every meal better

What surprises new gardeners

Three things catch most first-timers off guard. The first is **how much a zucchini plant produces**: one healthy plant can deliver a fruit every day or two in July, and by August you'll be leaving bags on neighbors' porches. The second is **how thirsty a raised bed gets** in July, because raised beds drain fast and heat quickly. The third is **how much of gardening is observation**: walk the beds daily with a cup of coffee, look under leaves, and catch small problems while they're easy. And a fall garden is a genuine second chance at your best crops.

SECTION 3

Site, Beds & Layout

A great garden begins with a good site, and the site is mostly about sun, water and access. Spend a weekend watching before you dig, and you'll save yourself years of working around a bad spot.

Map your sun

Sun is the one thing you can't amend, so measure it first. On a clear day, check your candidate spot at about 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., and note whether it's in full sun, partial shade or full shade at each time. Add up the hours of direct light. Anything with **6 to 8 or more hours** is a prime spot for tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers, beans and most other fruiting crops. Four to six hours suits leafy greens, herbs, peas, radishes and many root crops. Less than four hours is only good for a few shade-tolerant greens, or it's a better home for compost bins and the tool shed. Trees that look bare in March will throw deep shade by June, so re-check in leaf season before you commit.

Also check slope (a gentle slope drains well, but a low spot collects frost), wind (a windy corner dries soil fast and snaps tall plants), tree roots (they steal water and nutrients), and walnut trees, whose roots and leaves release juglone that harms tomatoes and peppers. Make sure a hose and wheelbarrow can reach the spot easily.

Raised beds or in-ground

Both work, and plenty of families use a bit of each.

Factor	Raised bed	In-ground bed
Soil quality	You choose the fill, so you can start with excellent soil on day one	You work with what you have; heavy clay or rocky soil needs years of building
Drainage	Excellent; warms fast in spring	Depends on your site; clay can stay soggy and cold
Cost to start	Higher: lumber or a kit plus fill	Lower: mostly tools and compost
Weeds	Fewer, especially with a cardboard base and mulch	More, especially in the first years
Best for	Beginners, small yards, poor native soil	Larger plots, big crops like potatoes, corn and pumpkins

If you choose raised beds, build them **4 feet wide** at most, so you can reach the center from both sides without stepping in. Length is up to you, though 8 feet is easy to manage. Depth should be **6 to 12 inches** for most vegetables and **12 inches or more** for carrots, parsnips, potatoes and other roots. Leave **2 to 3 feet** between beds for walking and wheelbarrows. For lumber, choose untreated rot-resistant wood such as cedar or locust, or a modern low-toxicity treated product from a reputable supplier. Avoid old railroad ties and any reclaimed wood that may have been treated with creosote or older preservatives. A pre-made raised bed kit is a fast way to start; no sawing required.

A first-year bed layout

Here's a layout in words so you can sketch it on graph paper, north at the top. It's one 4×8-foot raised bed with the length running east to west, divided into four 2×4-foot zones.

North edge (back, 8 feet long): a sturdy trellis or cattle-panel arch, so tall plants never shade short ones. Cucumbers climb the left half; pole beans or snap peas climb the right half. Tall things in back, short things in front.

Northwest zone: two cherry tomato plants, staked or caged, 18 to 24 inches apart, with a basil plant tucked between them.

Southwest zone: a block of lettuce and salad greens with a row of radishes along the front edge. These fast crops come out in spring and make room for a late-summer replanting.

Northeast zone: two zucchini plants if you have room; in a smaller bed, one zucchini and a row of bush beans.

Southeast zone: a row of carrots or beets, with kale or chard along the edge. Marigolds, calendula or nasturtiums edge the front to bring in pollinators.

Paths and labels: a 2- to 3-foot mulched path on every side, and a label on each section with the plant, variety and sowing date. If pets share your yard, a low fence or dense border planting keeps most dogs out, and the compost bin belongs where they can't reach it. For a second bed, rearrange the plantings so you can **rotate crops** from year to year (see the pests section).

SECTION 4

Soil Guide

Soil is the whole game. A tomato in good soil forgives almost any other mistake. The goal is soil loose enough for roots to run, rich enough to feed them, and able to hold moisture without staying soggy. That means plenty of organic matter, and organic matter means compost.

Test before you add anything

A mail-in lab test, available through your Penn State Extension office, reports **pH** (where 7 is neutral) plus phosphorus, potassium, magnesium and calcium levels. Most vegetables grow best at **pH 6.0 to 7.0**. If it's too low the lab will recommend lime; too high, sulfur. Don't add either by guess, since too much is hard to undo. If you fill a new bed from a bulk supplier, test the blend once it settles; "topsoil" varies enormously from yard to yard.

What to fill a raised bed with

The most reliable blend is roughly **one-third quality topsoil, one-third finished compost, and one-third an aeration component** such as pine bark fines, coarse perlite, or coarse sand. You'll hear many recipes; they differ in the details but agree on the principle: a mix of mineral soil, organic matter and air space. Keep the mix loose, fill the bed to the top, water it to let it settle, and don't walk on it.

Material	What it does	Best use	Cautions
Quality topsoil	Supplies the mineral base and holds nutrients	One-third of a raised bed blend	Quality varies; buy from a supplier you trust and avoid anything with visible clods, rocks or a sour smell
Finished compost	Feeds soil life, holds water, supplies slow-release nutrients	One-third of a raised bed blend; top-dress yearly	Make sure it's fully finished and doesn't smell of ammonia or rot
Pine bark fines	Open up soil, improve drainage, last for years	Aeration component in raised beds	Use composted or aged fines, not fresh bark
Coarse perlite	Lightweight aeration that doesn't break down	Aeration component, especially in containers	Dusty when dry; wet it before handling; doesn't add nutrients
Peat moss	Holds water	A small share of a mix if you wish	Doesn't feed soil; sold peat-only mixes dry out and turn hydrophobic; extraction is environmentally contested
Aged manure (composted for six months or more)	Adds nutrients and organic matter	Worked in months before planting	Fresh manure can burn plants and carry bacteria; never use dog, cat or pig manure
Lime (if the soil test says so)	Raises pH on acidic soil	Applied per soil-test recommendation	Too much locks up nutrients; add in the fall for best results

Each year, top-dress your beds with **1 to 2 inches of finished compost**, and the soil will build itself. Don't over-till; in raised beds you rarely need to dig at all. A broadfork or a garden fork to loosen compacted soil once in a while is plenty.

Avoid outright

Some things should never go into a vegetable bed, whatever a bag, a neighbor or a website suggests.

- **Fresh manure on crops you'll eat soon** — it can carry E. coli and Salmonella and burn tender roots. Compost it first and leave several months before harvest.
- **Dog, cat, pig or human waste in any form** — parasites and pathogens survive home composting.
- **Peat-only or "potting soil only" fills** — no mineral soil or nutrients, and they dry into water-repellent bricks.
- **Cocoa bean mulch** — smells wonderful and is toxic to dogs.
- **Railroad ties and old pressure-treated wood** — older products contained arsenic or creosote.
- **Walnut-tree wood chips, leaves or sawdust around tomatoes and peppers** — juglone damages them.
- **Unfinished or diseased compost** — it spreads weed seeds and plant disease. Bag diseased plants; don't compost them.
- **Soil or clippings from herbicide-treated lawns** — some lawn herbicides persist and ruin a season of beans and tomatoes.
- **Plastic landscape fabric inside beds** — it blocks water and soil life; use cardboard or mulch.

Building soil in an in-ground garden

Start with a soil test, loosen the top 8 to 12 inches with a garden fork, and spread 2 to 3 inches of finished compost over the surface. Lancaster County has plenty of limestone-based soils, some heavy and clay-rich, and yearly compost is the cure for nearly everything. Don't work wet soil: if a handful squeezes into a muddy ball that doesn't crumble when poked, wait a few days.

SECTION 5

Sun, Water & Season: The 3 Numbers

Three numbers do most of the work in a garden: how much sun, how much water, and what the season is doing. Get these right and almost everything else is forgiving.

Parameter	Target value	How to measure it	What goes wrong when it's off
Sun	6 to 8+ hours of direct sun for fruiting crops; 4 to 6 hours for leafy greens	Watch the spot at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on a clear day and add up the sunny hours	Too little: spindly plants, few flowers, little fruit, slow ripening; too much in extreme heat: sunscald, wilting, bolting lettuce
Water	About 1 inch per week from rain plus watering, delivered deeply at the base in the morning	A rain gauge or straight-sided can; push a finger 2 inches into the soil to check moisture	Too little: stunted plants, bitter greens, blossom end rot; too much or too often: root rot, split fruit, fungal disease
Season (soil temperature and frost dates)	Cool-season seeds sprout in soil of about 40 to 50°F; warm-season crops want about 60 to 70°F and nights above 50°F; plant warm crops after the last spring frost	A soil thermometer pushed 2 to 4 inches into the bed in the morning, plus your local frost dates and the ten-day forecast	Too early: seeds rot, transplants stall or frost kills them; too late: crops can't mature before fall frost, and cool crops bolt in summer heat

Sun, in practice

Fruiting crops (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, squash, cucumbers and beans) need the full 6 to 8 or more hours. Leafy greens, herbs like parsley and mint, and many root crops will make a decent harvest in four to six hours, and spinach and lettuce often last longer into summer with some afternoon shade. In midsummer heat, a piece of **shade cloth** over lettuce keeps it from bolting, which is when a plant sends up a flower stalk and turns bitter.

Water, in practice

About **1 inch of water per week** is the usual target, and rain counts. In July and August, raised beds and containers may need more, up to 2 inches in a hot, dry spell. Here's how to do it right:

- **Water deeply and less often.** A long, slow soak encourages deep roots; a daily sprinkle encourages shallow ones. Water until it soaks 6 inches down.
- **Water at the base**, not overhead; wet leaves invite fungal disease.
- **Water in the morning.** Plants go into the heat of the day well hydrated, leaves dry quickly, and less water evaporates.
- **Mulch.** 2 to 3 inches of straw or shredded leaves holds moisture, keeps roots cool and blocks weeds.
- **Be consistent.** Push a finger 2 inches into the soil: dry means water, damp means wait. Wild swings cause blossom end rot and split tomatoes.

Season, in practice

The calendar is the third number. Warm-season crops want warm soil and nights above about 50°F, and a hurry-up planting in cold ground just sits there or dies. A cheap **soil thermometer** takes the guesswork out: peas will sprout at around 40°F, lettuce and spinach at 40 to 45°F, carrots and beets at about 45 to 50°F, beans and squash at 60°F or more, and tomato and pepper transplants want soil near 60°F or warmer. Cool-season crops want to be up and harvested before summer heat. Pennsylvania gives you **three planting windows**: cool-season crops in spring, warm-season crops in summer, and a second cool-season garden

in fall that many beginners miss. The calendar later in this guide lays out all three.

SECTION 6

Compost, Fertility & Feeding Your Soil



Compost is the cheapest, most forgiving way to feed a garden: kitchen scraps and leaves become the dark, crumbly soil that vegetables love.

Feed the soil and the soil will feed the plants. That's the whole philosophy, and compost is the closest thing a gardener has to a magic ingredient: it's free, it keeps scraps out of the trash, and it makes soil that holds water in a drought and drains in a downpour.

Composting how-to

Compost is simply plant material that has been broken down by bacteria, fungi and worms into dark, crumbly, earthy-smelling humus. You provide four things: **browns, greens, moisture and air**.

- **Browns** are carbon-rich materials: dry fall leaves, shredded cardboard and paper, straw, sawdust from untreated wood.
- **Greens** are nitrogen-rich materials: vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee grounds, fresh grass clippings, spent garden plants.
- **Ratio:** aim for roughly **2 to 3 parts browns to 1 part greens by volume**. Too many greens and the pile gets slimy and smells; too many browns and it sits there doing nothing.
- **Moisture:** keep the pile as damp as a **wrung-out sponge**. Dry piles stall; soggy piles stink.
- **Air:** turn the pile every week or two with a fork, or use a tumbler.

What never goes in: meat, fish, bones, dairy, greasy or oily foods, **pet waste** (dog and cat waste carry parasites and pathogens), diseased plants, weeds that have gone to seed, and anything treated with herbicide.

Method	How it works	Time to finished compost	Best for
Hot composting	A 3-foot pile built all at once with a good browns-to-greens ratio, turned often; heats to 130 to 150°F	4 to 8 weeks	Gardeners who want fast compost and are willing to turn the pile
Cold composting	Add materials as you have them and leave the pile alone	6 months to 2 years	Busy people; a low-effort heap in a corner
Tumbler	A closed drum that you spin; stays tidy and critter-resistant	6 to 12 weeks if used in batches	Small yards, and pet-owners who want a secure bin

Finished compost is dark, crumbly and smells earthy, like a forest floor. If you can still tell what went in, it needs more time. Never use compost that smells sour or of ammonia.

Pet safety: moldy compost and food scraps contain mycotoxins that are toxic to dogs. Use a tumbler or a bin with a latched lid, and keep the kitchen bucket out of reach.

Fertilizer options

Healthy soil with yearly compost provides most of what vegetables need. Fertilizer is a supplement, used when your **soil test** or plants say something's missing. Fertilizer labels list three numbers, the **N-P-K** ratio: nitrogen (leafy growth), phosphorus (roots and flowers) and potassium (overall vigor and fruit).

Option	What it supplies	When to use	Notes
Finished compost	Balanced slow-release nutrients and organic matter	Every year, 1 to 2 inches on top of beds	The foundation; use it first
Balanced organic granular fertilizer	N, P and K from natural sources	At planting and midseason, per label	Slower and gentler than synthetics
Fish emulsion or seaweed (liquid)	Quick nitrogen and trace minerals	Every 2 to 4 weeks on heavy feeders like tomatoes and squash	Fish emulsion is smelly and pets may be drawn to it; water it in
Bone meal	Phosphorus and calcium	Only when a soil test shows low phosphorus	Dogs love it and can eat enough to get sick; mix it into soil
Blood meal	Fast nitrogen	Leafy crops that need a nitrogen boost	Attracts dogs and wildlife; use sparingly and cover
Aged manure	Nutrients and organic matter	Worked in in fall or early spring	Composted six months or more; never fresh on crops about to be eaten

Read the label and follow it. More isn't better: heavy nitrogen gives a lush green tomato plant with no fruit. Store all fertilizers, organic ones included, where pets can't reach them.

Organic amendments worth knowing

Leaf mold (shredded autumn leaves composted for a year or two) is a superb free conditioner. **Straw and shredded leaves** used as mulch feed the soil as they break down. **Grass clippings** from an untreated lawn make a nitrogen-rich mulch; never use

clippings from sprayed lawns. **Eggshells** add a little calcium slowly, but they won't fix blossom end rot, which is a watering issue. **Cover crops** are living green manure; see the Cover Crops section.

***Feed your soil.** Browse Composting Supplies and Gardening Supplements, Nutrients, and Treatments.*

SECTION 7

Seeds, Starting & Planting

Seeds are the cheapest, most hopeful purchase in the world: a few dollars for packets that can feed a family for months. A little vocabulary helps first.

Heirloom, open-pollinated and hybrid

An **heirloom** is an older variety, usually 50 years or more, that has been passed down because people loved it. Heirlooms are **open-pollinated**, meaning plants breed true from seed, so you can save seed from your best plants and grow the same variety next year. A **hybrid** is a deliberate cross of two parent varieties, bred for traits like disease resistance or uniformity; its saved seed won't grow true. Neither is better in every case. Heirlooms are prized for flavor and history, and they're central to food security because you can keep them going yourself; many hybrids shine in tough conditions. A mix of both is a smart first-year plan.

Starting seeds indoors

Tender warm-season crops (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant) need a head start. Start them indoors **6 to 8 weeks before your last frost date**, which in Lancaster County usually means mid-to-late March.

1. **Use seed-starting mix**, a sterile, fine, light blend made for the purpose. Garden soil is too heavy, can crust over and may carry disease.
2. **Fill clean trays or pots**, moisten the mix until damp but not dripping, and sow at the depth on the packet, usually two to three times the seed's width.
3. **Keep it warm**: most seeds sprout best at 70 to 80°F, and a heat mat helps.
4. **Give light**: once seedlings emerge, set a grow light 2 to 3 inches above the leaves for 14 to 16 hours a day. A windowsill alone usually leaves seedlings tall and floppy.
5. **Water from below**, keep the mix just damp, and feed lightly with half-strength liquid fertilizer after the first true leaves appear.

Hardening off and transplanting

Hardening off is gradually acclimating indoor-grown seedlings to wind, sun and temperature swings, and it takes **7 to 10 days**. Start with an hour or two in a shaded, sheltered spot, and add more sun and time each day until they stay out all day and night. Skip it and tender leaves scorch.

Transplant on a cloudy day or in the evening. Water the seedlings first, dig a hole slightly larger than the root ball, and set the plant in. **Tomatoes** are the exception to planting at the same depth: bury them up to the first set of true leaves, and they'll root along the stem. Firm the soil, water in well, and mulch. Wait until after your last frost date and nights are reliably above 50°F.

Direct sowing

Direct sow root crops, beans, peas, corn, squash and cucumbers, since they dislike having their roots disturbed. Sow at the depth on the packet, water gently, and keep the surface evenly moist until seeds sprout. Thin seedlings to the proper spacing by snipping rather than pulling. **Succession planting** means sowing small batches of the same crop every 2 to 3 weeks, so you harvest steadily instead of all at once. It suits lettuce, radishes, bush beans and carrots.

Spacing and timing table

Closer spacing works in raised beds, but leave enough room for air to move through plants. Dates assume zone 7a and are approximate; adjust to your last frost date.

Crop	Season	Sow or plant	Depth	Spacing (in bed)
Peas	Cool	Mid-March to early April, direct	1 inch	2 inches apart, trellised
Spinach	Cool	March to April; again in late August	1/2 inch	3 inches
Lettuce	Cool	March to May; again late August	1/4 inch	6 to 8 inches (heads), 2 inches (leaf)
Radishes	Cool	March to May; again September	1/2 inch	1 to 2 inches
Carrots	Cool	April to June; again July	1/4 inch	2 to 3 inches
Kale and broccoli	Cool	Start indoors Feb to March, or buy plants; again July for fall	Transplant	12 to 18 inches
Potatoes	Cool	Late March to April, seed potatoes	4 inches	10 to 12 inches
Bush beans	Warm	Mid-May through July, direct	1 inch	3 to 4 inches
Pole beans	Warm	Mid-May to June, direct	1 inch	4 to 6 inches, trellised
Cucumbers	Warm	Mid-May to June	1 inch	12 inches, trellised
Zucchini and summer squash	Warm	Mid-May to June	1 inch	24 to 36 inches
Tomatoes	Warm	Transplant mid-May	Deep, to first leaves	18 to 24 inches (24+ for large types)
Peppers	Warm	Transplant mid-May to June	Same depth as pot	12 to 18 inches
Garlic	Fall	Mid-October to early November	2 inches, pointed end up	4 to 6 inches

SECTION 8

Pests, Problems & Pet-Safe Gardening

Every garden has problems. The goal isn't a spotless garden; it's a healthy one where small problems stay small. That's the idea behind **integrated pest management (IPM)**: prevention first, then the gentlest fix that works. In order, that means healthy soil, the right plant in the right place, crop rotation, row cover, hand-picking, encouraging beneficial insects, and only then, a targeted treatment if you truly need one. Walk the garden daily and look under leaves.

Prevention habits that solve most problems: water at the base in the morning; space plants for airflow; mulch to stop soil splash; **rotate crops**, meaning you don't grow the same plant family in the same bed more than once every three years (tomatoes, peppers, potatoes and eggplant are one family; squash and cucumbers another; cabbage, kale and broccoli another); clean up plant debris in fall; and plant flowers like alyssum, dill, calendula and zinnias to bring in pollinators and predators such as ladybugs.

Blossom end rot

What you see: a dark, sunken, leathery patch on the bottom of tomatoes, peppers or squash. **Why:** the fruit isn't getting enough calcium, almost always because of uneven watering rather than too little calcium in the soil. **What to do:** water deeply and consistently, mulch, and remove affected fruit; later fruit usually recovers. **When to ask for help:** if it persists all season despite steady watering, a soil test will show whether pH or nutrients are off.

Powdery mildew

What you see: white, powdery patches on the leaves of squash, cucumbers and pumpkins in late summer. **Why:** a fungus that thrives in warm days, cool nights and crowded, humid plants. **What to do:** space plants, water at the base, remove the worst leaves, and pick up fallen debris; resistant varieties help next year. Harvests usually continue. **When to ask for help:** if it appears early and spreads fast, your Extension office can advise on a safe treatment.

Early blight

What you see: brown spots with concentric rings on the lower tomato leaves, which yellow and drop, working upward. **Why:** a fungus that lives in soil and splashes up in rain. **What to do:** mulch, stake plants off the ground, remove lower leaves, rotate crops, and clean up debris in fall; don't compost diseased leaves. **When to ask for help:** if it defoliates plants before fruit ripens, ask Extension about resistant varieties and approved options.

Late blight

What you see: large, greasy, gray-green blotches on leaves, white fuzz underneath in damp weather, and firm brown rot on fruit; it spreads fast. **Why:** a water mold that arrives in wet, cool weather and also infects potatoes. **What to do:** bag and discard affected plants right away (don't compost them), and don't save tubers from infected potatoes. **When to ask for help:** immediately. Late blight spreads between gardens on the wind; call Penn State Extension or your county Master Gardeners.

Tomato hornworm

What you see: chewed leaves, bare stems and dark droppings, plus a fat green caterpillar the size of your finger with a horn on its tail. **Why:** the larvae of a large moth. **What to do:** hand-pick and drop them in soapy water; leave any that wear white rice-like cocoons, since those are parasitic wasp eggs that will finish the job. **When to ask for help:** if you find many each week, ask Extension about biological controls.

Squash vine borer

What you see: a healthy squash plant that suddenly wilts, with a hole and sawdust-like frass at the base of the stem. **Why:** a moth lays eggs at the base in early summer, and the larvae tunnel inside. **What to do:** cover young plants with row cover until flowering, then uncover so bees can pollinate; if you catch it early, slit the stem lengthwise, remove the grub and bury the stem in

moist soil; a second sowing in mid-July dodges the egg-laying window. **When to ask for help:** if borers wipe out plants year after year, Extension can help you time plantings and barriers.

Cabbage worms

What you see: ragged holes in kale, cabbage and broccoli leaves, green droppings, and small white butterflies fluttering around. **Why:** the caterpillars of the cabbage white butterfly. **What to do:** cover plants with row cover from planting, or pick the green caterpillars by hand. **When to ask for help:** if damage reaches the growing heads, ask Extension about a safe, targeted biological spray.

Slugs and snails

What you see: irregular holes in leaves and seedlings, and silvery trails, especially after rain. **Why:** slugs feed at night in cool, damp, shaded conditions. **What to do:** water in the morning, remove hiding places, set shallow beer traps, and hand-pick at dusk. **Pet safety:** never use slug bait containing metaldehyde, which is highly toxic to dogs and cats. Choose iron phosphate baits sold as pet-safer, and still keep them away from pets. **When to ask for help:** if a pet eats any slug bait, call your vet or poison control at once.

Aphids

What you see: clusters of tiny soft green, black or gray insects on new growth and under leaves, curling leaves and sticky residue. **Why:** they multiply quickly on lush, nitrogen-rich growth. **What to do:** knock them off with a strong spray of water, avoid over-fertilizing, and encourage ladybugs and lacewings. **When to ask for help:** if plants are severely distorted, ask Extension whether insecticidal soap is a good fit, and use it exactly as directed.

Colorado potato beetle

What you see: plump yellow-orange beetles with black stripes, and orange-red larvae with dark spots, stripping potato, eggplant and tomato leaves. **Why:** the beetles overwinter in soil and emerge in spring. **What to do:** hand-pick adults and larvae into soapy water, crush the bright orange egg clusters on leaf undersides, and rotate potatoes to a new bed each year. **When to ask for help:** if a large planting is being defoliated, Extension can recommend options.

Deer and rabbits

What you see: clipped stems cut at a clean 45-degree angle near the ground (rabbits), or ragged torn leaves and nibbled tops of plants (deer). **Why:** your garden is a salad bar. **What to do:** a 2-foot chicken-wire fence buried a few inches deep stops rabbits; deer need a fence 7 to 8 feet tall. **When to ask for help:** if animals persist despite fencing, ask local Master Gardeners what has worked in your neighborhood.

Pet-safe gardening

A low fence or dense border plants help keep dogs out of beds, and the compost bin belongs where they can't reach it. These are the hazards that matter most.

- **Mulch: cocoa bean mulch is toxic to dogs.** Choose straw, shredded leaves, untreated wood chips or pine bark instead.
- **Slug baits and pesticides:** metaldehyde slug bait, rat poisons and many insecticides are dangerous. Follow labels and keep pets away for as long as they say.
- **Fertilizers:** bone meal, blood meal and fish emulsion attract dogs and can make them ill. Water them in and store them out of reach.
- **Compost:** keep bins latched; **moldy compost can cause tremors and seizures in dogs.**
- **Toxic plants: lilies are deadly to cats,** even a little pollen or vase water; sago palm, foxglove, oleander, azalea and rhododendron, autumn crocus and many spring bulbs (tulip, daffodil, hyacinth) are also dangerous. Onions, garlic, chives and

leeks, rhubarb leaves, and tomato and potato foliage are also toxic if eaten.

- **Choose verified plants:** before planting anything new, search the **ASPCA's toxic and non-toxic plant database**. Sunflowers, zinnias, snapdragons, basil, thyme, rosemary and nasturtiums are among the pet-safe choices.
- **Keeping cats out, humanely:** lay chicken wire or mesh flat over bare soil and plant through it; use pine cones or coarse mulch on the surface; scatter citrus peels, which many cats dislike; plant densely so there's no bare soil; and give the cat a **dedicated sandbox or digging box** of its own, filled with clean sand, in another corner of the yard.
- **Emergency:** keep the **ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, (888) 426-4435**, and the **Pet Poison Helpline, (855) 764-7661**, handy. Call right away if you suspect a pet has eaten something, and don't wait for symptoms.

SECTION 9

Harvest, Storage & Putting Food By

The reward for all this care is the harvest, and a little knowledge about when to pick and how to keep it means nothing goes to waste.

Harvest at peak

Pick early in the day while plants are cool and crisp. Harvest zucchini small (6 to 8 inches), beans before the seeds bulge, and radishes at about an inch across; cut lettuce from the outside in. Pick tomatoes fully colored, or bring green ones indoors if frost threatens. Harvest often; picking encourages more.

Storage by crop

Crop	How to store	Typical keeping time
Lettuce and leafy greens	Wash, spin dry, and keep in a container lined with a towel in the refrigerator	5 to 10 days
Tomatoes	Counter, out of direct sun; never the refrigerator, which dulls flavor	5 to 7 days
Carrots, beets and parsnips	Trim tops; layer in damp sand or in a bag in the refrigerator or a cool root cellar	1 to 4 months
Potatoes	Cure for 1 to 2 weeks, then store dark, cool (about 40 to 50°F) and dry	3 to 6 months
Onions and garlic	Cure in a warm, airy, dry spot for 2 to 4 weeks until the necks are dry, then store cool and dry	4 to 8 months
Winter squash and pumpkins	Cure about 10 days at 80°F, then store at 50 to 60°F	2 to 6 months

Curing means letting certain crops dry and toughen their skins in a warm, airy place before storing; it's what lets onions, garlic, potatoes and winter squash keep for months.

Freezing, drying and canning

Freezing is the easiest way to begin: blanch most vegetables (boil briefly, then plunge in ice water) to stop enzymes, drain, and pack in freezer bags. **Drying** suits herbs and hot peppers. **Canning** needs more care: low-acid foods like green beans, corn and most vegetables must be pressure canned, while high-acid foods like pickles and some tomato products can be water-bath canned. Botulism is a real risk from improper canning, so **always follow tested recipes from the USDA, the National Center for Home Food Preservation or Penn State Extension**, never an old family recipe of unknown origin or a shortcut from the internet.

Saving seeds

Open-pollinated and heirloom varieties come true from saved seed, which is how families kept their food supply going for generations. Beans, peas, lettuce and tomatoes are the easiest. Let a few of your best plants mature fully (bean pods dry on the vine; scoop tomato seeds, ferment them a few days, then rinse), dry the seed thoroughly, and store it in labeled paper envelopes somewhere cool, dry and dark. Don't save seed from hybrids; it won't grow true.

SECTION 10

Season-by-Season Calendar

This calendar is for zone 7a (much of south-central Pennsylvania). Dates are typical; adjust to your own frost dates and weather. Remember that **fall is a planting season, not only a cleanup season.**

Season	Timing	Main jobs
Winter planning	January to February	Order seeds, plan beds and rotations, review your notebook, service tools, order a soil test
Late winter seed starting	Late February to March	Start broccoli, kale and cabbage indoors; start tomatoes and peppers 6 to 8 weeks before the last frost; chit (sprout) seed potatoes
Early spring bed prep	Mid-March to mid-April	Add compost, assemble raised beds, direct sow peas, spinach, lettuce, radishes and carrots; plant onion sets and potatoes; use row cover for frost nights
Last frost, warm-season planting	Late April to mid-May	Harden off seedlings, transplant tomatoes and peppers, direct sow beans, squash, cucumbers and corn once soil is warm and nights hold above 50°F; mulch
Early summer care	June	Mulch, water deeply, stake and trellis, thin carrots, watch for squash vine borers, harvest peas and lettuce; sow more beans
Midsummer harvest and succession	July to early August	Harvest daily, water 1 to 2 inches a week, remove spent crops, sow more bush beans and carrots, start fall brassica seeds indoors or in a nursery bed
Late-summer fall crops	Mid-August to mid-September	Direct sow spinach, lettuce, radishes, kale, turnips and arugula; transplant broccoli, cabbage and kale; shade seedlings from late heat
Fall cleanup and cover crops	Late September to November	Harvest tender crops before the first frost (light frost possible from mid-October; median first freeze around November 1), cure and store winter squash and onions, plant garlic mid-October to early November, sow cover crops, add compost and leaves, cover frost-tolerant greens with row cover
Winter rest	December	Mulch garlic, protect the compost, keep a notebook of what worked, enjoy your pantry

SECTION 11

Cover Crops & Winter Care

A **cover crop** is a plant grown not for harvest but for the soil's sake. Cut down and left in place, or dug in, it becomes **green manure**: free fertilizer. Cover crops protect bare soil from winter erosion, choke out weeds, add organic matter and feed soil life. Sow them in late summer to fall, the moment a bed is finished.

Cover crop	Sow window (zone 7a)	What it does	Notes
Winter rye	Mid-September to late October	Suppresses weeds, builds organic matter, protects soil	Very hardy; cut it in spring and wait 2 to 3 weeks before planting; hardest to manage in small raised beds
Crimson clover	Late August to mid-September	A legume that fixes nitrogen; beautiful red flowers that feed bees	Needs a head start before frost; may winter-kill in zone 6
Hairy vetch	Early September to early October	A legume that fixes nitrogen; heavy cover	Often sown with rye; keep it away from horses and livestock
Oats	Late August to mid-September	Fast growth, smothers weeds, then winter-kills	Easiest for beginners; the dead mulch can be planted into in spring

Using a cover crop: broadcast the seed over a cleared bed, rake it in lightly, and water. In spring, cut the plants down before they set seed, lay the residue on the bed as mulch or turn it under shallowly, and wait 2 to 3 weeks before planting.

Winter care: mulch garlic with 3 to 4 inches of straw once the ground begins to freeze, and cover leafy greens with row cover or a low hoop tunnel to keep them going. Pull out spent plants, bagging any diseased ones, and drain and store hoses before hard freezes.

The 15-minute tool reset

Tools last decades with 15 minutes of care at season's end. **Clean:** scrub off soil with a stiff brush and water, and dry thoroughly. **Sharpen:** run a file or sharpening stone along the beveled edge of shovels, hoes, pruners and trowels. **Oil:** wipe metal with a rag lightly dampened with oil, and rub the handles with linseed oil. Store them dry and off the floor.

SECTION 12

FAQ

When should I start a vegetable garden in Pennsylvania?

Start planning in winter and planting in early spring. In Lancaster County (zone 7a) you can sow peas, spinach, lettuce and radishes outdoors as soon as the soil is workable, typically mid-March to mid-April, and tender crops like tomatoes, peppers, squash and beans go out after the last frost; the median last freeze is around April 11, but many local gardeners wait until early to mid-May for tender transplants. Start tomatoes and peppers indoors 6 to 8 weeks before that date. A second round of cool-season crops goes in from mid-August to mid-September, and garlic in mid-October. Check your own local frost dates, since they vary across the county.

How deep should a raised bed be?

Six to 12 inches is enough for most vegetables, and 12 inches or more is better for root crops like carrots, parsnips and potatoes. Roots will also reach into loosened ground below an open-bottomed bed. Keep the bed no more than 4 feet wide so you can reach the center from both sides, and leave 2 to 3 feet between beds. A pre-made raised bed kit is a quick way to get the dimensions right.

What soil should I use in a raised bed?

Use a blend of roughly equal parts quality topsoil, finished compost and an aeration component such as pine bark fines or coarse perlite. That gives you mineral soil, organic matter and air space in one mix. Fill the bed loosely, water it to settle, and don't compact it by walking on it. Avoid peat-only mixes without compost. Test the blend (most vegetables like pH 6.0 to 7.0) and top-dress with an inch or two of compost every year.

How often should I water a vegetable garden?

Aim for about 1 inch of water per week, counting rain, and give it in one or two deep soakings rather than a daily sprinkle. Water at the base of the plants in the morning, so leaves stay dry and less water evaporates. Raised beds dry out faster and may need up to 2 inches in a hot, dry July. Push a finger 2 inches into the soil: if it's dry, water. Mulch holds moisture, and a rain gauge takes the guesswork out.

How much sun do vegetables need?

Most vegetables want 6 to 8 or more hours of direct sun a day, and fruiting crops like tomatoes, peppers, squash and cucumbers do best at the high end. Leafy greens, herbs, peas and many root crops will still produce with 4 to 6 hours, and lettuce and spinach often last longer into summer with a little afternoon shade. Add up the sunny hours at your site on a clear day, and check again once trees have leafed out.

What is the difference between heirloom and hybrid seeds?

Heirloom seeds come from older, open-pollinated varieties that breed true, so you can save seed from your best plants and get the same variety next year. Hybrid seeds come from a deliberate cross of two different parent plants, usually bred for disease resistance, uniformity or yield, and seeds saved from them won't grow true. Heirlooms are loved for flavor and history; hybrids can be more reliable in tough conditions. Many gardeners grow both. If self-sufficiency matters to you, as it does to us, make heirlooms a big part of your garden.

How do I start composting?

Choose a spot, set up a closed bin, tumbler or simple pile, and start layering browns (dry leaves, shredded cardboard, straw) with greens (kitchen scraps, coffee grounds, grass clippings) at roughly 2 to 3 parts browns to 1 part greens by volume. Keep it as damp

as a wrung-out sponge, and turn it every week or two to add air. Never add meat, dairy, oils or pet waste. A hot pile can finish in 4 to 8 weeks, a cold pile in six months or more; it's ready when it's dark, crumbly and earthy-smelling. Keep the bin secured so dogs can't get in.

What are the easiest vegetables for beginners?

Lettuce and salad greens, radishes, bush beans, zucchini, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, peas, kale and herbs are the most forgiving. Radishes and lettuce give you a harvest within a month, while bush beans and zucchini are generous and need little fuss. Cherry tomatoes are easier than big slicers because they ripen early and rarely crack. Start with a handful in one 4×8-foot bed and grow what your family likes to eat.

How do I keep cats out of my garden?

Make the beds less inviting and give the cat a better option. Lay chicken wire or plastic mesh flat over bare soil and plant through it, cover soil with coarse mulch or pine cones, scatter citrus peels, and plant densely so there's little bare dirt to dig. Place a dedicated sandbox or digging box filled with clean sand in a corner of the yard. All of these are humane and safe for pets. Avoid mothballs and chemical repellents, and keep lilies out of the yard entirely, since they're deadly to cats.

What cover crops should I plant in fall?

Good choices for zone 7a are winter rye, crimson clover, hairy vetch and oats. Winter rye is the hardiest and is sown from mid-September to late October. Oats grow fast, smother weeds and winter-kill, leaving an easy mulch, which makes them a great beginner choice sown in late August to mid-September. Crimson clover and hairy vetch are legumes that add nitrogen; sow them in late summer or early fall. Rake the seed in lightly, water, and cut plants down in spring before they set seed.

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SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** Not at checkout. Not as an option. Off the top of every order, every day.

That means something specific for gardeners. A garden is where pets and people share the sun, and a little forethought keeps everyone safe. When you choose pet-safe mulch, secure the compost bin and check a plant against the ASPCA's list, you're caring for animals the way our shelter partners do every day. And if you're ever in a position to adopt a dog or cat, a garden is a wonderful place for them to land.

We're a family business in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We grow our own vegetables, tend our own orchard, keep our own animals, and stock the clean-label, USA-made goods we'd put in front of our own family: **Clean Fuel, No Junk**, and no mystery ingredients. If you have a question about your raised beds, your soil, your seed-starting schedule or which plants are safe around your pets, call us at **(717) 983-8069**. We'd rather talk it through with you.

Welcome to the garden. Plant something this week, keep a notebook, and be patient with yourself.

*From our family to yours, **Walnut Creek Supply** — Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania walnutcreeksupply.com*