



Tilling the soil brings gardeners of all ages together. Copley News Service

Find healthy fun in home gardens

By Keely Wygonik
staff writer

T IRED OF being a couch potato? Want to turn over a new leaf? Sow and you shall reap the many rewards of home gardening. Sounds corny, but it's true.

Gardening is good exercise and relaxing. "You get the variety you want, the best tasting, and freshness," said Vera Sullivan horticulture consultant for the Wayne County Extension Service.

You don't have to be a farmer to grow vegetables; all it takes is a little effort and planning.

"People who say a garden is too much work are usually right. Then gardens were too much work because they tackled larger gardens than they could handle with the available tools and labor," said Tom Stebbins, a master gardener specialist in the department of horticulture at Michigan State University.

It's always better to have a successful small garden and wash it away bigger than a big garden that disappears under a carpet of weeds in June or swamps you with more beans, tomatoes or summer squash than you can use or give away.

Once you've decided to have a garden, hold the shovel; there's some ground work to cover before you dig in.

If the soil in your yard the stuff good gardens are made of -- well drained, loamy and full of organic material? If not sure, test it by scooping up a handful.

If it "cracks and clings together in a ball like clay," plant roots will have a hard time penetrating and die due to lack of air and water. If the soil runs through your fingers it's light and sandy. Water and nutrients will drain away too quickly to benefit plants.

your soil by adding peat moss, about a two-inch layer, into the top six inches of soil, and rescuing coffee grounds, grass clippings, vegetable and fruit peels from the trash. These will decompose and make your soil richer.

Keep in mind gardens need 6 to 8 inches of full sun a day to be fruitful and water. They don't have to be in the back yard or all in one place. Some can be grown in patio planter boxes or hanging baskets.

The possibilities are endless. Plant a row of leaf lettuce behind the yellow and orange marigolds you put in front of your shrubs every year. The lettuce will accentuate the marigolds, and the marigolds will keep the bugs away from the lettuce. A match made in heaven.

Instead of growing vegetable plants in the numbers in your hanging planters. The leaves are as nice as the tender plant, and as a bonus, you get pretty yellow flowers that turn into cucumbers.

There are a few of the vegetables that can be combined with or used in place of flowers in beds or for borders. Some others to consider are bush and pole beans, radishes, beets, Swiss chard, spinach, lettuce and tomatoes.

They are among the easiest to grow, Sullivan said.

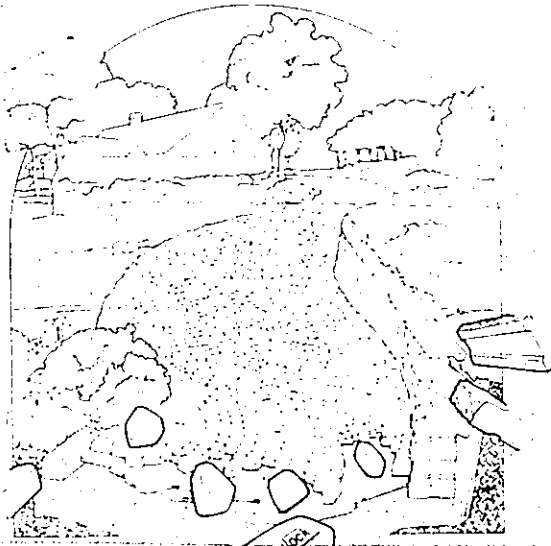
BUT WAIT there's something else you need to know. Most vegetables are either cool or warm season crops, said Mike Boyer, nursery department manager at English Gardens, 6370 Orchard Lake Road in West Bloomfield.

Cool season vegetables grow best in spring or fall and can withstand some frost or freezing temperatures. Lettuce, spinach, radishes, beets and turnips can be planted as soon as the ground can be worked in the spring, usually late March or early April.

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