

## Starting your garden

Once the crocuses start sprouting and the birds start singing it means spring is here, and it's time to start your garden. A successful garden starts with four important steps: selecting plants, preparing soil, planting and maintenance.

### Selecting plants

The first step in planning a garden is deciding what you want to grow. Take a look at what you usually buy when you do groceries – your garden will be much more rewarding if it produces things you actually like to eat! For the beginning gardener herbs and vegetables are your best bet; fruit trees can be challenging and expensive to grow. Some of the easiest crops to grow in Toronto are: green onions, lettuce, spring radishes, carrots, tomatoes, beans and cucumbers.

Think about how much time and space you have free to devote to a garden, and take a look at your site, does it get full sun (6 hours or more), partial sun (3-6 hours) or shade (less than 3 hours). Certain plants, like tomatoes and peppers are heat loving and require lots of sun, while others, like lettuce prefer cooler temperatures and about 4 hours of sun a day. It is also important to decide if you want to grow your plants from seed or if you would prefer to buy ready grown seedlings from a greenhouse.

*For more about selecting and starting plants for your garden, read our **Selecting Plants** info sheet.*

### Preparing Soil

Once you have chosen what to plant, you want to make sure your soil is ready and fertile. As a general rule, the darker the soil and the more worms and other creatures living in it, the more nutrients it has available and the better it is for your plants. If your soil seems dry and grainy or heavy and waterlogged, the best solution is to add more compost! Compost is organic material (like food scraps and garden wastes) which have been broken down by insects and microbes to become a nutrient rich plant food. Compost can increase drainage and reduce soil compaction as well, and you can make it for free at home or collect it free from the city on community environment days – check online for when there is one in your neighbourhood.

*For more details on improving and assessing your soil, read our **Soil Health** info sheet.*

### Planting

Planting your seeds and seedlings in a suitable area is an important part of the garden as well. A smart garden layout can make work much easier, if everything is close together your beds are easy to reach that means much less labour and much more space available for growing. How you group plants also needs consideration. Companion planting is the practice of grouping plants that grow well together, and keeping those that don't apart. Tomatoes, for example, grow better near basil and carrots, and planting them near asparagus and garlic repels damaging insects. They don't like to be planted near potatoes or corn however, because they can share diseases and pest infestations.

*To learn more about companion planting and garden planning read our **Planting** info sheet*

### Maintenance

Once your garden is growing, you need to know how to care for it. There are many simple ways to prevent disease, such as always watering the roots instead of the leaves, and allowing soil to dry out on top between waterings, but not to crack. If you keep your plants from getting stressed (not too cold, hot, wet or dry) they should stay healthy and productive. Pests and problems will likely arise, however, and it's best to deal with them using natural rather than chemical means, so that you can maintain the health of the beneficial insects and creatures in your garden. Many problems can be avoided by taking care of your soil and by using simple, homemade sprays of garlic and peppers to repel squirrels and harmful insects.

*For details on natural garden care including weed and pest prevention read our **Caring for your Garden Naturally** info sheet.*