

Square Foot Edible Gardens By Dawn Donovan

Many of us are thinking about the upcoming growing season and planning to have a garden filled with fresh vegetables and even flowers for cutting. While there are many ways to create a garden in your landscape, given our poor soil and the difficulty of digging through clay and rock, raised beds make the most sense. Of particular interest is the square foot garden.

The name Square Foot Gardening was developed by Mel Bartholomew in the 1970's.

His idea was to create a garden that is easy to maintain, capable of producing multiple crops and can be created in virtually any yard. Because it is a raised bed, it can be built on any soil and in a small space. Today the term is still used and has been applied to a variety of garden styles that incorporate the original idea. Another advantage of a square foot garden is that the soil will warm up earlier, allowing plants to sprout earlier in the season and extending the growing season.

Follow the simple steps below and you'll be enjoying your own freshly picked fruits and vegetables. First identify an area in your yard that gets 6-8 hours of sun per day -- an easy task for most homes in northern Nevada. Ideally you will be using the south or west side of your home. Check to be sure there are no large trees or other objects (sheds, doghouse, etc.) that may produce prolonged shadows on the chosen space. Also be sure that there is a convenient source of water -- drip irrigation is good, but hand watering allows you to monitor your garden regularly.

Next, decide how large you want your square foot garden to be -- remember, you are creating squares that should be easily accessible from all sides without stepping onto the soil -- so 2' x 2', 3' x 3', 4' x 4'. Beds can be longer, but not wider; the idea is that you want to easily reach every plant while remaining outside the frame. The depth should be a minimum of 6" up to a maximum of 12". Check with your local independent nursery for a pre-made kit or you can build your own. If you're ambitious you can always create multiple square gardens with aisles between them.

Once you've set up your frame, fill it with quality soil -- don't skimp on this; better soil will save on water. This will ensure that your plants will get the most nutrients possible and help them develop quickly. You can purchase an organic potting soil (Gardner & Bloome Potting Soil) or mix your own: 1/3 compost, 1/3 peat moss and 1/3 coarse vermiculite.

Now you can begin planting (according to their respective planting times) vegetables, herbs, and flowers. Plant each variety in a 1x1 foot section of the box. If you chose a 4 x 4 frame, you will have 16 total 1'x1' squares to plant. You may want to sketch your ideas on graph paper before planting.

There are many varieties of vegetables and flowers that can be grown by seed and transplant. You can take advantage of the entire growing season by choosing multiple varieties that will produce from spring through fall. If you are not familiar with cool season plant choices and early maturing vegetables talk with trained nursery professionals at your local garden center. They will help you get the most from your square foot garden and assist you in planning for an abundance of vegetables.

Once you've chosen your plants and placed them in the garden, you'll want to protect your investment. Cover your vegetables with a loose netting to protect them from grazing wildlife. You can easily use boards, pipe, or pvc to prop netting up over your garden. You'll still be able to gently hand water your plants through the netting with no hassle.

If gardening is new to you, a visit to your local nursery will be instructive. In addition to demo gardens to see, they have everything else you'll need, including expert advice and experience, to be successful in your gardening projects. I'd also recommend purchasing a copy of Mel Bartholomew's All New Square Foot Gardening book.

After your garden is planted, Mother Nature will take over with a little help from you to weed, water, fertilize and harvest. Now is the time to get growing and enjoying your own garden -- the growing season is here. Take advantage of these rainy spring days to prepare and reap the rewards of your efforts.