

100% Success With Your New Vegetable Garden

Three-Step Soil Prep, Essential Tools and Five No-Fail Vegetable Crops

Bill Thorness

☀️ Three-Step Soil Prep

1. Get to know your soil and its fertility.

- Soil type test: In a quart jar, add a cup of garden soil and nearly fill with water. Put on the lid and shake well. Let sit a day or two. The soil will break apart and settle into layers. Bottom layer is sand, then silt, then clay, and floating on the water will be organic matter. The result can guide your use of soil amendments.
- pH test: Home kits are available which will simply (but only generally) tell you the pH range in your soil. A reading of 7 is neutral, lower is acidic, higher is alkaline. Vegetables like it in the 6.5 to 7.5 range. Once you know, you can take steps to adjust it.
- Commercial soil test: A lab test is useful for soil makeup, detailed readings of major plant nutrients (N-P-K), accurate pH, the level of organic matter, and other information, like minerals or heavy metals. Tests every 2-3 years will reveal the success of your efforts to improve the soil. Try soiltest.umass.edu or check with the Master Gardeners or your county extension agent.

2. Bring in amendments. Organic soil amendments with compost and manure will improve the soil. Look for commercial blends that are certified organic. Amendments with minerals, microbes and fungi are great.

- New beds: add a 2-4" layer, dig in to 8-12" deep
- Existing beds: add a 1-2" layer on top and plant into it
- Add agricultural lime as needed based on pH testing.
- Let the bed sit for a couple of weeks after amending.



3. See if it's ready.

- Perform the "soil readiness test" with a handful of soil
- To dry the bed out faster, cover it for up to a week with plastic sheeting
- Don't cover for too long—that kills the foodweb of critters living and working in your soil

About the Speaker: Bill Thorness, author of *Cool Season Gardener* and *Edible Heirlooms*, writes for regional media and speaks at gardening events and nurseries around the Pacific Northwest.



 **Five No-Fail Vegetable Crops**

For best success, follow seed packet guidelines on sowing, thinning and spacing. Seek out varieties that are commonly grown in your region. Use fresh seed (less than 3 years old). Some crops can be grown from transplant starts purchased at a nursery, but larger-seeded crops (beans, peas) are easy from seed, and growing from seed offers more choice and economy.

Crop	Varieties (for Maritime NW gardens)	Growing Tips
Lettuce	<i>Butterhead:</i> , Tennis Ball, Continuity <i>Romaine:</i> Little Gem, Forellenschluss, Rouge d’Hiver, Winter Density <i>Loose-leaf:</i> Speckled, Green Deer Tongue, Red Oak Leaf, Merlot	Can sprout in cool soil (50 degrees) but also transplants well from flats. Grow multiple varieties for a varied salad. Plant a bit every week for continual harvest. Some varieties give second harvest if cut to ground.
Peas	<i>Snow:</i> Oregon Sugar Pod II, Oregon Giant <i>Snap:</i> Sugar Snap, Cascadia <i>Shelling:</i> Green Arrow, Tall Telephone, Lincoln	Can sprout in cool soil. Pre-soaking overnight speeds sprouting. Tossing with inoculant can reduce disease problems. Most need support—staking for bush type, trellising (thin wire mesh or twine) for vining type. Regular picking encourages larger, longer harvest.
Beans	<i>Bush:</i> Dragon Tongue, Provider, Blue Lake, Calypso <i>Pole:</i> Fortex, Blue Lake, Scarlet <i>Runner:</i> Painted Lady, Trail of Tears	Need warmer soil to sprout. Bush type benefit from 3’ stakes between plants. Trellis pole and runner beans up to 6’ with bamboo, twine, mesh or wire grid. Regular picking encourages larger, longer harvest.
Cherry Tomatoes	Sungold, Yellow Pear, Black Cherry, Chadwick’s, Sweet Million	Grow from starts. Trellis with 6’ bamboo and wire grid. Grow 5-6 stems, tie lightly to trellis. Pick regularly.
Kale	Red Russian, Lacinato/Nero di Toscano, Wild Garden mix	Keep bed moist while sprouting or grow from starts. Cut larger leaves first.

 **Essential Tools**

Buy quality tools with wood handles, forged heads, sturdy parts. Expect to spend about \$250 for all. Keep clean and dry when not in use, sharpen yearly.

- Spading fork – D handle, 4 tines
- Garden rake – short, thick tines, flat backside
- Pruners – bypass is best; sized to fit your hand
- Hand fork – three heavy, pointed tines
- Trowel – generous scoop, sharp tip, possible serrated edge
- Hori-hori – Japanese garden knife, thick steel
- Bastard file – flat, with angled sharpening grid

“When your hands are turned to the soil, you will be full.” -- Hawaiian proverb