

# 4 Steps to a Productive Garden

Text & Photos by Ann Wetzel

## Keys to a Lush, Productive Garden This Year

### STEP ONE

#### Start with the Soil

Your plants are only as strong as the foundation they grow in. Test your soil's pH and nutrient levels, then amend with compost, organic matter, or slow-release fertilizers as needed.

If you had issues last season (poor growth, yellowing leaves), now's the time to fix them! Consider raised beds or fresh topsoil if your ground is compacted or depleted.

This applies to containers too, remove 1/3 of the soil used last year and top with new fresh potting mix. Add compost or leaf mold if available or boost soil with organic fertilizers and microryza fungi.

### STEP TWO

#### Clear, Prep & Plan

Remove any lingering debris from winter, including dead plants, weeds, and fallen leaves that may harbor pests or disease then, plan your garden layout strategically.

#### Sunlight:

Position sun-loving plants (like tomatoes, peppers, dahlias, cosmos) in full sun; which is at least 6 hrs. of direct sunlight per day. Shade-tolerant varieties (like lettuce, spinach, torenia, coleus) in partial shade receives less than 6 hrs. of direct sun per day or receives dappled light all day.

#### Crop Rotation

Avoid planting the same crops in the same spot year after year to prevent soil depletion and pest problems. This applies to containers too. If you have to plant the same plants in the same pot remove all last year's potting mix, wash out the container with a weak bleach solution. Then add fresh potting soil to the container.



Companion Planting: Place plants together that help each other thrive—basil and tomatoes make great partners! Also anything in the mint family is great for deterring pests. The volatile oils in mints mess with pest's ability to locate the plants they want to feed on. **\*Do not plant mint in the ground in a border it will be very invasive and take over.** Use in pots dotted throughout the garden.

### STEP THREE

Set Up a Smart Watering System or smart schedule for containers.

Even the best gardens struggle without consistent moisture. Consider soaker hoses or drip irrigation to deliver water directly to the roots while minimizing evaporation. If watering by hand also aim for root area and try not to get the tops of the plants wet if watering late in the evening.

Mulch around plants to retain moisture and suppress weeds. Important for container gardens too! Especially if on a balcony as wind dries out plants and soil faster than heat. If using a sprinkler system, aim for early morning watering to prevent fungal issues. If watering by hand, aim for early morning (best) or early evening in the summer. Plants need to dry off before the temps get cool at night. Do not water in the evenings in spring and fall.

### STEP FOUR

Time to Plant!

With your soil prepped, plan in place, and watering schedule created you're ready to plant.

Early spring is perfect for cool-season crops like lettuce, kale, peas, and root vegetables. Annual flowers like Alyssum, Buttercups, African Daisy, violas & Pansies.

As temperatures rise, warm-season favorites like tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and squash can take center stage. Along with familiar annuals such as zinnias, verbena, petunias, lantana, dahlias for an explosion of color!

