

How do I Pick a Site?

When picking an area to garden, there are a few site considerations you should take into account before you get too far into the planning process. Once you have picked a site, conducting a detailed site analysis will help you design and plan a garden that make the most of your resources. Check out our cool interactive Garden Designer once you are ready to start getting down to the details!

Site Considerations

* **Light**

For most plants, particularly fruits and vegetables, you will need a site where the majority of the area receives at least 6 hours of direct sun daily. Look at surrounding buildings and trees, which can significantly impact levels of sunlight.

* **Drainage**

Many plants cannot tolerate very wet soils for a prolonged amount of time. You should see no standing water after heavy rains.

* **Slope**

Steep slopes can be difficult to work garden because bare soil will be washed off after heavy rains. You should look for land that is as level as possible, and watch for any low spots that may puddle during rainstorms. If you have to build on a slope, build beds or terraces that run across the slope.

* **Surrounding vegetation**

You should look for a site that does not have a lot of trees. They can create shade and compete with crops for water and nutrients. Also, look out for plants that may prove problematic when clearing the site, such as poison ivy, poison oak, or stinging nettles.

* **Exposure**

Ideally, you will want a site that is protected from high winds, which can rob soil moisture, erode topsoil, and damage delicate plants. Good air circulation, however, helps prevent disease. In cooler regions, you may want to avoid low-lying frost pockets.

* **Water!**

Ideally, you will want to be located close to a water source. You'll need plenty of water, and it's too heavy to haul! Adding an underground pipeline to carry water from a distant source is possible, but also impractical and expensive.

* **Wildlife**

It can be beneficial to have a site that is protected from wildlife. If deer or other large animals are present, fencing may be necessary, which can be costly to install.

* **Ownership**

If the plot of land you are considering to garden is not owned by you or your gardening team, you will have to find out who owns the site. If it is a vacant city lot, it may be owned by the city or an individual. Either way, it will be worth checking with the owner to see if you can rent or buy the land.

Site Analysis

A site analysis, or site survey, will help you decide where to place features in your garden. It is important to know what is present on your site before you begin, so that you can make the best decisions regarding features like soil composition, shade, and water. Once you have assessed the features of your garden, creating a series of site maps will help you start designing it, and will also serve as a record of how your garden has changed over time.

* **Size & Dimensions**

It would be easy enough if all gardens were squares or rectangles, but some are not. To have the most detailed map possible, measure distances between existing buildings, trees, etc, and include these in your garden drawings. Knowing the exact size of your garden will help you calculate it's square footage, so that you can figure out how big your plots will be, how many plants you can plant, and how much fertilizer or compost you will need. See our Geometry Refresher if you need help determining your square footage.

* **Soils**

Soil quality and composition can change multiple times in even the smallest garden, and will affect how you fertilize and what you plant. Color and texture are good indicators of soil composition, and a series of soil tests will help you get to know your soil in detail. See our Soil Health page for details on soil composition and testing.

* **Slope**

If you have a slope to your garden, it will be useful to record this information on any maps that you create. Depending on soil composition, moisture loving plants can be planted in low-lying areas at the end of slopes which will gather rainwater. Steep slopes can be terraced, which is an earth-shaping technique that has been used for centuries to farm on the steep mountains of Japan and South America.

* **Light**

Spending a day at your plot during sunny weather will help you map patterns of sunlight in the garden. This process will let you know which parts of your garden receive full sun (over 6 hours) or shade (less than 2-3 hours). The direction and timing of sunlight should be considered as

well, because afternoon light and southern or western exposures will receive more intense levels of sunlight. Knowing the amounts and intensity of sunlight received will help you make decisions about which plants to place where. Check out this link for detailed instructions on how to Create a Garden Sunlight Map.

*** Drainage**

Drainage is important because it will tell you about soil composition and about how long the soil will retain water after a storm. Conducting a series of drainage tests will help you find out how different areas of your garden drain. To conduct a drainage test, dig a small hole about 1–2 feet deep and fill it with water. You should monitor how quickly the hole empties– if the water is gone in less than hour, the soil is well drained and probably of a sandy texture. If the water takes several hours to disappear, the soil has poor drainage and probably contains a high percentage of clay. Record the areas of well drained and poorly drained soils on your map. See our Soil Health page to find out how to cope with these different types of soils.

*** Traffic Patterns**

Even if you have a fully fenced lot for your garden, you will still have to cope with the way people move across the site. A site that is located on an unfenced vacant lot may have long served as a shortcut for neighbors walking from place to place, and they may continue to walk through the site even after you have begun to garden it. Unless you plan to fence your garden, knowing traffic patterns can help you minimize damage from foot traffic or vandalism, and the pathways people use should be included on your initial garden map.

*** Surrounding and Existing Features**

Make sure to carefully map all features in and around your garden, including buildings, sidewalks, trees, fences, utility boxes, etc. You should also know where any underground utility lines are located, and you should mark these before you begin to dig. Call your local utility company, which will provide you with this information free of charge.

*** Neighbors**

Are you located near any schools, businesses or private residencies? You should note who lives/works near your garden, and make a note of lines of sight that you may want to block or enhance in your garden design. This may be particularly important if you are going to be erecting any permanent structures, such as a shed or gazebo, or features that may be disliked by some neighbors, such as chicken coops or compost bins.