Today on Across the Fence grab that shovel, pick up that packet of seeds and start gardening. We're digging into the tips and techniques that you can use now to get your garden going and growing all summer long. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us, I'm Judy Simpson. When we think about eating local food it's easy to overlook that the freshest food we can eat can be grown right in our own backyards. Nothing tastes as good as something you grow yourself, but getting to enjoy the fruits of your labor can be a bit tricky for the first timer or even a seasoned pro.

Today we take off on a series of gardening programs that will take us through the growing season. Planting a garden is the easy part but it takes planning and preparation if you really want your garden to grow. Let's join University of Vermont Extension Horticulturalist Leonard Perry who's at the home of a Vermont Garden writer whose advice to first time gardeners is ‘think small.’

Kathy your asparagus looks awesome what is your secret?

Thanks Leonard. It's been here for 20 years.

Kathy LaLiberte is one of those people who was born with a green thumb. Even early in the season her garden grows with vigor and vitality. The first thing she tells every gardener is to know their limits. How big should one plan on for a garden?

Kathy.: I would say not this big. This is much too big of a garden for most people in fact it's too big for me. You can grow an incredible amount of food in a relatively small amount of space and I would say a garden that's about 1/4 of this size would be plenty for the average person. For beginning gardeners the important thing is to have a garden you feel really successful about. The smaller sized garden makes you be able to keep up with things keep it weeded keep plants happy and it's much more satisfying. Having a good experience in the garden is really good to keep you going for the next year.

Leonard.: Before LaLiberte sows one seed or one plant in the ground she puts down cardboard and straw. This practice controls weeds, helps the soil retain moisture and establishes permanent paths. Using straw and set of hay eliminates unwanted weeds while creating a great way to lead visitors and growers down the garden path. I guess the first thing is it's all very organized and laid out looks like she planned this ahead of time I assume that's a key to get started.
Kathy.: Yes these beds have been here in the same position for about 20 years. I don't till the beds and I'll show you a minute how I fork them over. They don't use any power equipment I think that's really the best thing for the soil that's my philosophy anyway. Just fork it over and not to disturb the structure.

Leonard.: Some people say they feel that repeated tilling breaks up the soil structure so just a hand especially if you don't have a whole lot and a lot of people like the tilling that all depends on your philosophy.

Kathy.: But forking is really easy and I'm into easy.

Leonard.: Will good soil too so how do you keep track of where everything is? It looks like you have a plan there?

Kathy.: I do I brought my plan to show you. A long winter there's plenty of time for planning. What I do is try to make a really simple plan of the garden every year so it helps me keep track of where different crops have been one year to the next. That way I can rotate where they're located from one year to the next.

Leonard.: You mention rotation. You don't want to plant the same crop in the same bed.

Kathy.: Right, especially for certain things like tomatoes and potatoes and things like that but I find it's a good idea to rotate everything.

Leonard.: Does it help keep down disease? Is that one of the ideas?

Kathy.: It does and also pests. You'll see that I plant in blocks which I think keeps pests a little bit more confused like they can go right down the row of carrots and eat them all. They maybe find some and do not see the other ones.

Leonard.: Also you'll plant some carrots and then some another place not all your carrots here. Pushed that mind I tend to do like most people probably do his plans all the tomatoes here and all the peppers there. And you kind of mix it up.

Kathy.: Yes I think the diversity plus I like the way it looks it looks kind of like wild and of course the way it looks is important.

Soil preparation is a key to establishing any garden. Beginning gardeners should conduct a soil test. Kits are available through the University of Vermont Extension or from any garden center. Some green houses and garden centers offer free tests to customers at the start of the growing season. Even though LaLiberte's garden is well established adding soil amendments is a good way to get a jump start the season.

So you are ready to dig here this is great soil already what are you going to do to make it better and get ready to plant?

Kathy.: I always add compost before I turn over the soil so I have compost and then I put in a little bit of all-purpose granuled organic fertilizer. Just a little bit the soil is really good here and I've been fertilizing it a little bit every single year for a long time. You don't want to overdo it, too much nitrogen and you'll
get too much leafy growth and not enough fruit so I am pretty conservative with the fertilizer what I do is put on an inch or two of compost every year.

Leonard.: That adds some fertility too, so you can back off on fertilizer and depending on people’s philosophy on garden you to go with synthetic vegetable garden fertilizer or just a regular all-purpose organic. So we're ready to dig here.

Kathy.: What I do is put on some compost first. I'm not very scientific the good thing about compost is you do not have to worry about too much most of the time. I just sprinkle it on.

Leonard.: Looks like good stuff. I think one thing about compost I've heard friends who have done it a good deal. Free from some farmer that hasn't been composted properly and they've ended up with a lot of weed seed so you want a good quality work you get it.

Kathy.: What I would do is lift the soil like this.

Leonard.: So you don't turn it over?

Kathy.: I don't usually turn it over I usually just loosen it. Really weeds do not have too easy of a chance getting established and I plan very intensively so there's not a lot of room either,

Leonard.: Once the plants get growing.

Kathy.: Then I go through here and I'm just sort of because there's some clotty kinds of things in there So I'm just…

Leonard.: Breaking it up. I guess if you're starting and have heavy clay soil you might have to do a little bit more.

Kathy.: You might have to, but this is the reward if you're lucky enough to live in the same place for a period of time. Each year you add compost I've added in over time shredded leaves, the straw rots and gets incorporated into the bed. This didn't look like this when I started but what plants wouldn't want to grow in that?

When it comes to gardens, timing is everything what to plant is up to you but knowing when to plant is essential to making sure you have food all summer. Crops like corn, cucumbers and carrots are direct seeded. Greenhouses and garden centers to sell seedlings like tomatoes and peppers but these plants can also be started by seeding at home. Starting plants from seed it's an economic way to plan your garden and the way to have many different and unusual varieties.

Kathy I see some nice earthworms that must mean your soil's really good.

Kathy.: I'm very proud of the soil.

Leonard.: Okay looks like the strata plant the soil is luscious with all this compost in it. What do we have here?

Kathy.: I'm ready to plant tomatoes. I have a tomato here Cosmonaut Volkov this is from seeds that a friend of mine gave me; I assume it’s Russian. This plant I started back towards the end of March and
this is about as big as it is now. I started them under lights at first and then in the greenhouse over the last couple weeks.

Leonard.: I think that's a good point in itself starting from seed you can get a lot of varieties.

Kathy.: I have a lot of different varieties the problem is I don't need that many tomatoes there so many interesting ones to try. What I am going to do first is take off some of the lower leaves here break them offer cut them off and suppose because am going to bury this plant about 2 inches deeper then we see here. Because tomatoes are one of the plants and tomatillos is another one that can root along their stem. Most plants peppers and those kinds of things you want to plant right at the soil level because if you cover up their stem like a tree you wouldn't cover up a tree stump you can't root along this but tomatoes will make roots along here and more roots mean more nutrition for the plant and more fruit.

Leonard.: Especially if you come up with a leggy tomato that's a good way to make it not so leggy plant a little deeper.

Kathy.: Yeah this is one of the not leggy ones in the house there's some leggier ones.

Leonard.: If it's really root-bound what would you do.

Kathy.: You might loosen this up a little bit I know some people will score it. I don't like to damage the roots in that way. You should try to get your plants in the ground before they get super root-bound or if you're buying them in a nursery look for plants that are not a total mass of white if they are OK but you want to tease it apart a little bit. If you bought them in a peat pot or something like that I know they're supposedly decompose in the ground I guess they do eventually but I like to tear that off and break it up so the roots to get out into the soil and get the moisture that they need. Sometimes the peat holds and the roots too well.

I'm going to plant this tomato plant here right and the spot. They you dig a little place for it through some of the soil and I'm going to put in a little bit of the fertilizer maybe an eighth of a cup and dig it into the roots and make sure that the area is nice and loose to get those young roots established. I have a tomato plant here this is a Cosmonaut Volkov. You see the tomatoes have little sprouts at the bottom and I am going to tear those off because I am going to put the tomato in about 2 inches below. That's going in the ground here settle it and nice and deep. Some people put them in deeper I think this is fine. Bring the soil around and then lightly press it like that you don't want to stomp it down or press too tightly you want to preserve the airspace among the soil. Then I water it in with a little bit of diluted organic fertilizer give time for the water to get all the way to the bottom of the root ball and get it settled in like that. The next thing I'm going to do is put on the tomato cage. Some people use stakes and other things I like the cages because watch how easy it is. I put the cage down and around the sides press it in and you're set.

Leonard.: Kathy guess you have cage is set up there with some white cloth around them what's going on there?

Kathy.: Let me show you what I've done. It's really windy here as it is in many people's gardens and I find that the wind really stresses plants especially peppers and tomatoes. So once I put the cage on what I do is wrap the cages with this garden fabric and keep it nice and tight with regular clothespins. And leave this on until well into June maybe three or four weeks. Plants inside of this cocoon are protected from the wind. It moderates the temperature and creates a nice microclimate that they like. If frost does threaten you can take this fabric and wrap it over the top and click it so they're protected from frost. We've waited long enough that it's probably not going to be a frost issue but you'd be surprised how well they grow
Leonard.: This is just a thin frost type fabric you can buy in many garden stores. Use for frost protection or even insect sometimes and I guess this is a neat little idea.

Kathy.: Right, this is doubled up here because that's why did I didn't do that wide but it isn't that critical what kind you use just so you're letting some air flow through.

Leonard.: You have tomatillos here you use it for tomatoes and you mentioned peppers too?

Kathy.: I also use it for peppers. Not quite as important there sometimes I'll put a tunnel over the peppers and so the cages but for these tomatillos which in the greenhouse got almost 2 feet tall if you just put them out here and it was windy they'd really get tortured so I put them out here yesterday and you can see for all they know they're still in the greenhouse.

We want to thank Kathy for sharing her beautiful garden with us on this fine May day. We'll be back later in the summer to see how these crops have grown and again in the fall. But before we leave today there's one more aspect of vegetable gardening we really want to show and that's direct seeding into the garden. This is what you do for many different crops and today we're going to be working in a raised bed to show this. Raised beds are another aspect of vegetable gardening that's great. For one thing I find and a lot of gardeners find them easier to maintain and for reduced mobility you can make these even higher and they are lot easier to work in. We'll be showing making two types of sowing for today. For smaller seeds such as carrots radishes lettuce and others like that you want to make a small trench maybe 1/4 to half an inch at most because they're very small and you want to sow them just under the surface. There are seeds sowing devices you could use. I like to just tap them out of the packet. Just tap very gently. If too many do come out you can move them along the trench or you'll come back later and thin these out as they grow. Then cover them up very gently like so and pat them down.

For larger seeds such as beans corn and squash you can plant these in a row or you can push them and like this it's that easy. About 2 inches apart for these beans. Just push them down about 1 inch deep. Just like seedlings anything you plant you want to water right after they are in the ground. Especially for the seedlings or the seeds since there so small they will need water every day if it doesn't rain. Just gently make sure that surface is wet and they don't dry out. If you're unsure about how far apart to plant or how do you basically all seed packets have directions so just follow those. Thanks for watching today on Across the Fence for University of Vermont extension I'm Leonard Perry.

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