

The 5 Main Steps of the Market Gardener Method

For professional market gardeners, I've made a plan for an entire year of vegetable production, which is also a source of inspiration for home gardeners!

The Steps

1

SET CLEAR GOALS

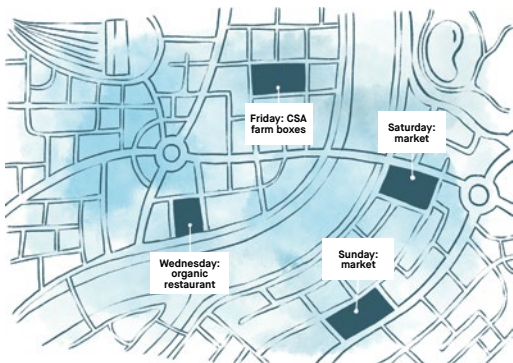
Define your financial and professional targets. Remember why you chose to grow vegetables and what your motivations are to continue doing so sustainably.



2

MAKE A PRELIMINARY PRODUCTION PLAN

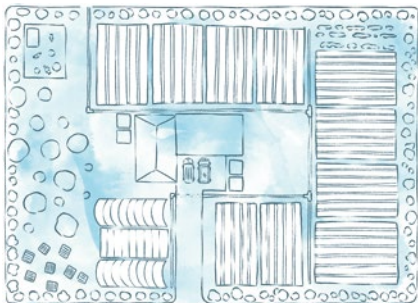
Choose what crops to grow based on demand and profitability. Decide how much you want to grow and when each crop will be planted.



3

MAP OUT YOUR GARDEN

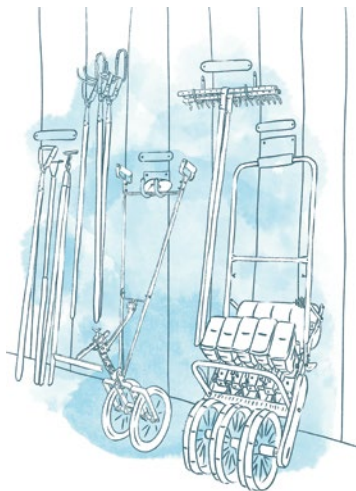
Draw an overview of your vegetable garden. Identify each plot, taking into account your needs and crop rotation plan. Maximize your space by integrating all infrastructure (tunnels, cold frames, tool shed, composting area, etc.).



4

MAKE A CROP CALENDAR

Create a calendar in which you schedule seeding, transplanting, and harvesting tasks. Consider timing requirements, days to maturity, and preparatory work (loosening and amending soil, etc.).



5

ORDER SUPPLIES AND TOOLS

Choose your seeds, materials, and equipment. Calculate the required amount then order a little more to provide a safety margin.

Tip from Jean-Martin Fortier

These steps are the foundation of crop planning and are critical for optimizing farm management practices, maximizing yields, and reaching your financial goals.

Set Financial and Staffing Goals

To establish a successful microfarm, every grower must start with a minimum financial investment and be surrounded by competent people.

Setting Clear Objectives

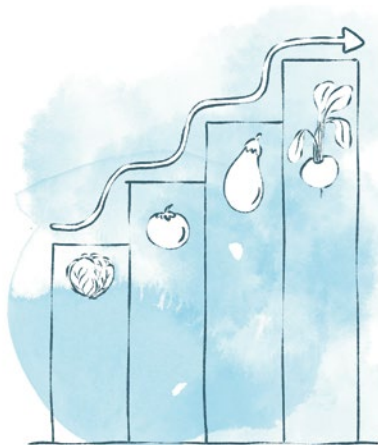
When crop planning, a critical first step is to establish sound financial and staffing goals. Start by developing a clear vision to determine the direction your microfarm will take in the coming season.

Your Financial Vision

Setting financial goals means creating a solid foundation for your market gardening season. Think of it as the treasure map guiding your journey. These financial targets help you answer a crucial question: where do you want your farm to take you over the coming season?

This is your opportunity to set clear, realistic financial benchmarks. Remember that it's important to be pragmatic and avoid wishful thinking.

By determining your yields, and thus your expected revenue, you will figure out whether your farm can meet your financial goals. This step is fundamental in assessing the financial viability of your operation and identifying any necessary changes.



Monitor sales trends so you are able to meet demand.

Staffing Requirements

Your financial goals are one piece of the puzzle, but your labor requirements are just as significant. Who will be a part of your team? How many people will you need to hire to hit your targets? What skills are required to help you successfully grow, care for, and harvest your crops?

Each member of your team must play a specific role in building a solid operation. By determining your staffing requirements, you'll know whether your financial goal is viable. If your team is already partially or fully established, this step helps you ensure everyone shares the same financial and staffing vision. This, in turn, will nurture better collaboration.



Where Should I Start?

Start by determining how much revenue you must generate to achieve your goals. This is about so much more than dollar amounts—these numbers will serve as your compass. They answer crucial questions: How much income do you expect to generate for yourself and your team? What kind of profits do you want to make?

Once you have established your financial goals, assess whether they are realistic based on the size of your catchment area and your experience. Make sure your expectations are in line with your microfarm's environment.

Think about the workforce needed to achieve these goals. How many people will be required, and what skills should they have? Assess whether your current team has the skills and the capacity to handle your project. This might prompt you to pursue more education or training or consider hiring new staff.



Know how to strengthen your team to address seasonal workloads.

Establish an Action Plan

In this step, you'll develop a strategic work plan for the coming season. This includes determining the types of vegetables to produce and how to market them and what equipment is required to grow them well.



Identify Sales Channels

To develop a strategy, you first need to identify potential points of sale. Consider your geographic location and whether there are local stores and restaurants that might appreciate fresh local produce. These can become excellent points of sale.

Farmers' markets offer a way to sell your products directly to consumers. Explore the markets operating nearby and choose ones that best suit your offerings. Explore whether veggie boxes exist in your area and whether you can join as a supplier or consider starting your own.

Local grocery stores and organic cooperatives, in search of fresh, local produce, may be open to partnering with market gardeners to supply vegetables. If your farm is located near a city or large town, consider opening your doors to customers for direct on-farm sales.

Decide What Vegetables to Grow

After deciding what vegetable crops to grow, you can determine the necessary bed space, staffing, and supplies.

Opt for high-value crops, those that deliver high returns per unit area. Include one or more uncommon vegetables in your

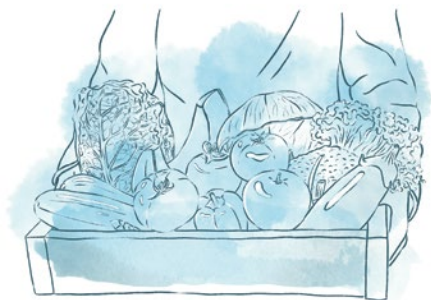
offering to pique customer interest; displaying a few lesser-known items breaks the routine and makes you stand out from the competition.

Think about your hardiness zone, the length of your growing season, and any local microclimates that might affect crop outcomes.

Be careful not to overstretch yourself by offering a wide array of vegetables that you don't know how to grow well. It's better to do a good job growing a smaller variety of crops than to do a bad job growing lots.

Grow Crops Even in the Winter!

Remember to include vegetables that thrive in the fall and winter—brassicas, spinach, carrots, leeks, and turnips—and can be harvested even when temperatures drop below freezing. Lastly, invest in the right equipment for growing under tunnels or floating row covers to extend your shoulder season and harvest in the winter. This is critical for maintaining a steady stream of revenue in the off season.





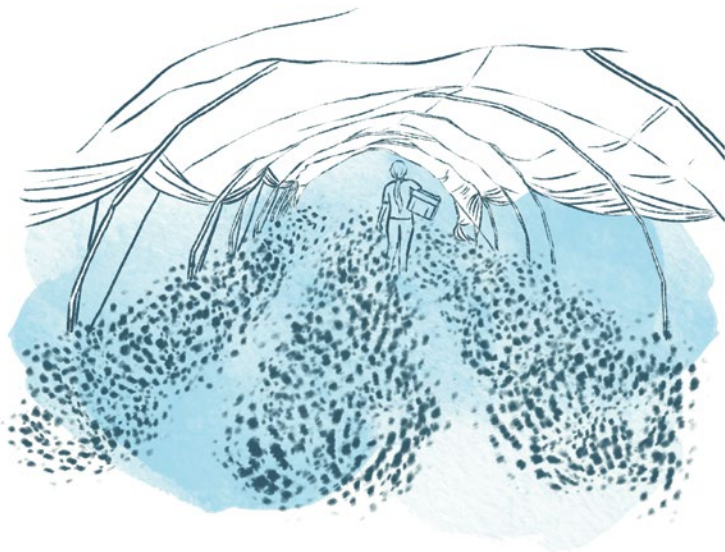
Consider Storage Vegetables

Potatoes, beets, carrots, onions, garlic, and winter squashes are all sound choices. Plan ahead so you'll have enough to sell throughout the winter and make sure you have enough storage space.

To build customer's loyalty, offer freshly harvested vegetables such as carrots, leeks, or cabbage along with storage crops.

Some customers may wonder if your produce just came from refrigerated storage and therefore isn't quite farm fresh. To dispel these feelings and give your display a boost, consider growing extra-fresh vegetables such as mesclun, lettuces, or radishes.





Seeding Under Cover

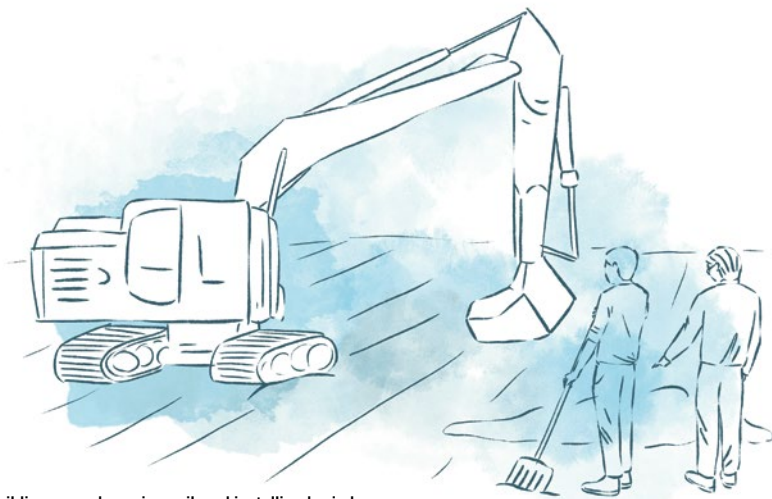
Greenhouses and tunnels provide so many advantages for market gardeners. Although their initial cost may seem high, the structures quickly pay for themselves.

First, they allow growers to start crops earlier in the spring and keep them in the ground longer into the fall. This means you can produce vegetables that are less common in any given season and highly sought-after by consumers who will pay a premium price for them.

Second, extending your shoulder seasons with a greenhouse or tunnel allows many consecutive vegetable crops to grow in the same bed, thus increasing your total yields.

Finally, these structures protect crops from adverse and unexpected weather events like heavy rainfall, winds, and sudden drops in temperature.

As a result, you have more control over the vegetables' growing environment: you can manage the temperature, relative humidity, watering, airflow, and pests and diseases. In these closed environments, it's easier to stop the spread of fungal diseases or introduce beneficial insects. You will create optimal conditions for your crops.



Building a pond, moving soil, and installing buried infrastructure are tasks that require the occasional use of construction equipment.

Expect the Unexpected!

Planning also means anticipating unforeseen events and dealing with setbacks. To prepare, you should establish a budgetary roadmap that will guide you throughout the season. This document must account for spending on supplies—seedlings, seeds, and growing materials, as well as tools and all kinds of small equipment—and also provide for the acquisition and depreciation of more expensive equipment. Identify any anticipated major purchases such as new tools or permanent structures (greenhouses, tunnels, food-processing or packing rooms, storage facilities, etc.).

You should also plan for the cost to maintain and replace equipment that wears out over time like silage tarps and irrigation systems.

Build these expenses into your budget so you'll have the funds when they are needed.

Additionally, bear in mind that you will likely have to deal with unforeseen events; a surprise frost, for instance, might require you to quickly buy protective equipment, repair damaged infrastructure, or replace destroyed plants.

Including this leeway in the budget will allow you to address the unexpected calmly and ensure that your operation is financially stable. By anticipating costs, you are better prepared to face all issues that might arise during the season. This, in turn, contributes to making your business more sustainable.

Accurately Assess Profitability

Hiring staff or investing in equipment can provide many benefits. It can allow you to increase your growing area, diversify your operations, and respond positively to new opportunities. For example, with a larger workforce, you could consider joining an additional weekly market or including more value-added products such as juices, sauces, or ready-made meals.

Similarly, acquiring new specialized equipment can streamline certain tasks and increase the efficiency of your operation. However, it's essential to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of these investments to ensure they contribute to making your business more profitable. A sound financial plan and thorough analysis can help you make the right decisions about managing operations while maintaining satisfactory and sustainable profitability.



Tip from Jean-Martin Fortier

Everything that happens in your garden is determined by the operations calendar you create during early-season planning. This serves as a roadmap guiding you towards success and profitability, so take the necessary time to carefully craft it and make it your trusted partner for the coming season.

Plan Your Farm Layout & Draw a Map

On paper, this map allows you to visualize the layout of the farm and organize the distribution of plots around existing buildings.





The results of a soil analysis help you better understand its composition.

Once you've chosen what crops to grow and their sales channels, it's time to draw a map of your farm layout and organize the different areas: vegetable plots, washing and packing stations, aisles and pathways. Putting these details on paper makes it easier to plan and organize the work.

This overview is essential for effectively managing the complexities of crop successions, determining locations for vegetables, establishing planting and harvest schedules, and optimizing the use of infrastructures like tunnels and greenhouses. The main objective is to optimize use of available space while providing ideal growing conditions for each crop.

Before drawing up your overall plan, it's a good idea to conduct a soil analysis.¹ This will help you understand its characteristics and select crops accordingly. Bountiful harvests are a sure bet when you have a balanced living soil.

¹ See *Living Soil* in the *Grower's Guides* from the *Market Gardener* collection.

When creating your map, you have to consider multiple factors that may be tricky to bring together. First, group vegetables according to their needs (irrigation, shading, and plant protection), which will make crop maintenance much easier. For example, if you're planning to set up a sprinkler system, avoid planting crops nearby that are prone to disease when the foliage gets wet such as summer squashes. To spend less time weeding, put direct seeded crops in clean beds that were previously covered with a silage tarp (occultation tarp). To limit disease and insect pressure, implement a crop rotation plan so that in any given area you don't plant the same veggie or two varieties from the same family.

Second, include cover crops like clover or mustard, in crop planning. They help to improve soil quality by fixing nutrients while reducing weed pressure.

Always Evolving

As beautiful as your map may be, it's not a work of art! It's a real-life working tool that must be updated as your operation evolves. Each new season requires adjustments to plots, beds, and equipment. If you regularly update it, the map will remain a valuable visual guide for proper management of your microfarm.

Prepare an Operations Calendar

This document improves outcomes for any farm because it outlines the tasks to be performed for each crop and organizes the work for the entire team.



Having drawn up the layout of your plots on a map and divided them into beds, you can create an operations calendar.

Throughout the season, this roadmap for your crops will be useful for improving efficiency in sowing, planting, and crop maintenance.

Start by writing down the intended planting dates for each crop, taking local climate into account. Use weather forecasts and average temperature data to better adjust these dates. Next define anticipated harvest dates for each crop based on the variety's days to maturity. Make sure you allow enough time for harvesting, preparing, and packing vegetables before they go to market.

You should also integrate all crop and soil maintenance tasks, including weeding, irrigation, and phytosanitary treatments. Allow yourself some flexibility in case of unforeseen events such as bad weather or insect pest infestation.

Your operations calendar is an adaptable tool that you can tweak as the season progresses. It helps you anticipate labor, supplies, and equipment needs for every stage of each crop's growth. Ultimately, a carefully crafted calendar will significantly contribute to a successful gardening season.



An operations calendar that is kept up to date allows you to stay on track from seeding to harvest.

Staying on Track

After finalizing your operations calendar, you must stick to it as much as possible to maintain an efficient and consistent production all year long. Update it by recording all operations undertaken, from planting and harvest dates to irrigation frequency, fertilizer inputs, and phytosanitary treatments. This practice allows you to monitor each crop's development.

If you're working with a team, make sure everyone knows the schedule as it outlines the operations to be done for each crop and specifies the tasks to be completed for the week, or even for a given day.

A well-managed calendar will support your farm's overall success by ensuring effective management of time, resources, and crops throughout the growing season.

Tip from Jean-Martin Fortier

Make sure you take notes throughout the season and record any lessons learned in your operations calendar.

It's completely reasonable to make mistakes when starting up a microfarm. What's not acceptable is repeating them year after year!

Start Strong with the Right Equipment

The final step in setting up a microfarm involves purchasing equipment and supplies.

To get off to a strong start and not waste time, make sure you aren't missing anything. Planning ahead simplifies the ordering process. With a clear understanding of your entire operation and growing plan, you can anticipate the necessary equipment and supplies, ensuring you have them all before the season begins, which avoids having to rush out to buy a tool or materials, especially when extensive fieldwork is underway.

In the previous steps, you listed what was needed and how much: tools, seeds, potting mix, containers, floating row covers, etc. All that's left is to decide which varieties, brands, or models are the best for you and put in an order.

Keep in mind when ordering that specialized equipment for small-scale vegetable farming may involve particularly long delivery times.

Selecting Seeds

Seeds play a central role in farm operations, and for market gardeners, selecting the right seeds is a crucial step that determines crop quality, disease resistance, harvest yields, and adaptation to local growing conditions. We therefore recommend carefully consulting catalogs from different seed producers and comparing the advantages and specific characteristics of their varieties.



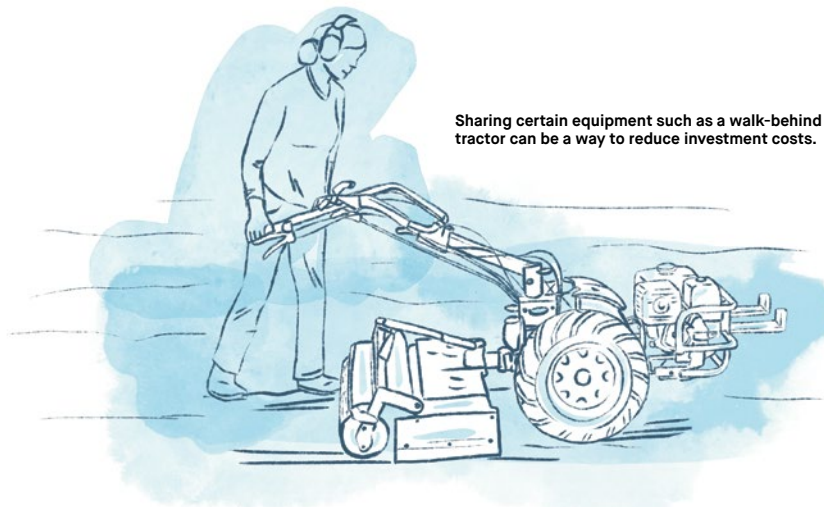


Before getting a greens harvester, you should determine exactly what your needs are for this piece of equipment.

Tools

Which tools are right for you? This depends on your types of crops, size of operation, and intended growing methods. From soil preparation to harvesting, every step requires specific tools to help you work efficiently and effectively. When deciding on a particular purchase, always ask yourself the following question: can this tool save me enough time to make it a worthwhile investment?

While certain hand tools like broadforks, rakes, hoes, tilters, and seeders are essential for smooth operations, you might legitimately ask whether you truly need a walk-behind tractor or greens harvester. On our farm, the mesclun harvester significantly decreased time spent harvesting and increased the profit this crop generated on a weekly basis, both of which more than justified the purchase.



Sharing certain equipment such as a walk-behind tractor can be a way to reduce investment costs.



It's best to keep small supplies on hand for when the need arises: seeds and bags for storing them, twist ties and rubber bands for bunching veggies, paper bags or containers for packaging fragile vegetables, etc.



Consider harvest bags, as they provide flexibility and are easy to use.

Don't Forget Growing Materials and Supplies

Fertilizers, potting soil, row covers, stakes, twist ties, and harvest bags and crates are some of the many accessories that complement your garden tools. These products, which regularly have to be replaced or maintained, must meet the needs of each crop. To market your produce, you also will require packaging, such as trays and paper bags, as well as rubber bands to bundle vegetables. Don't disregard these small supplies as they help showcase your produce display. Your choice of packaging and its source also reflects your farm's environmental stance.

A Final Word of Advice

It's a good idea to keep an inventory of all materials and supplies in order to know exactly what you have on hand, how much was used, and when to reorder stock.

Tip from Jean-Martin Fortier

Seeds intended for professional market gardeners are not always identical to those sold to home gardeners. While it's essential for all growers to select varieties that are suited to their soil and local climate, with proven yields and disease resistance, professionals must also consider profitability and harvest uniformity to ensure customer satisfaction. We therefore recommend modern varieties, often labeled F1, rather than heirloom varieties.