



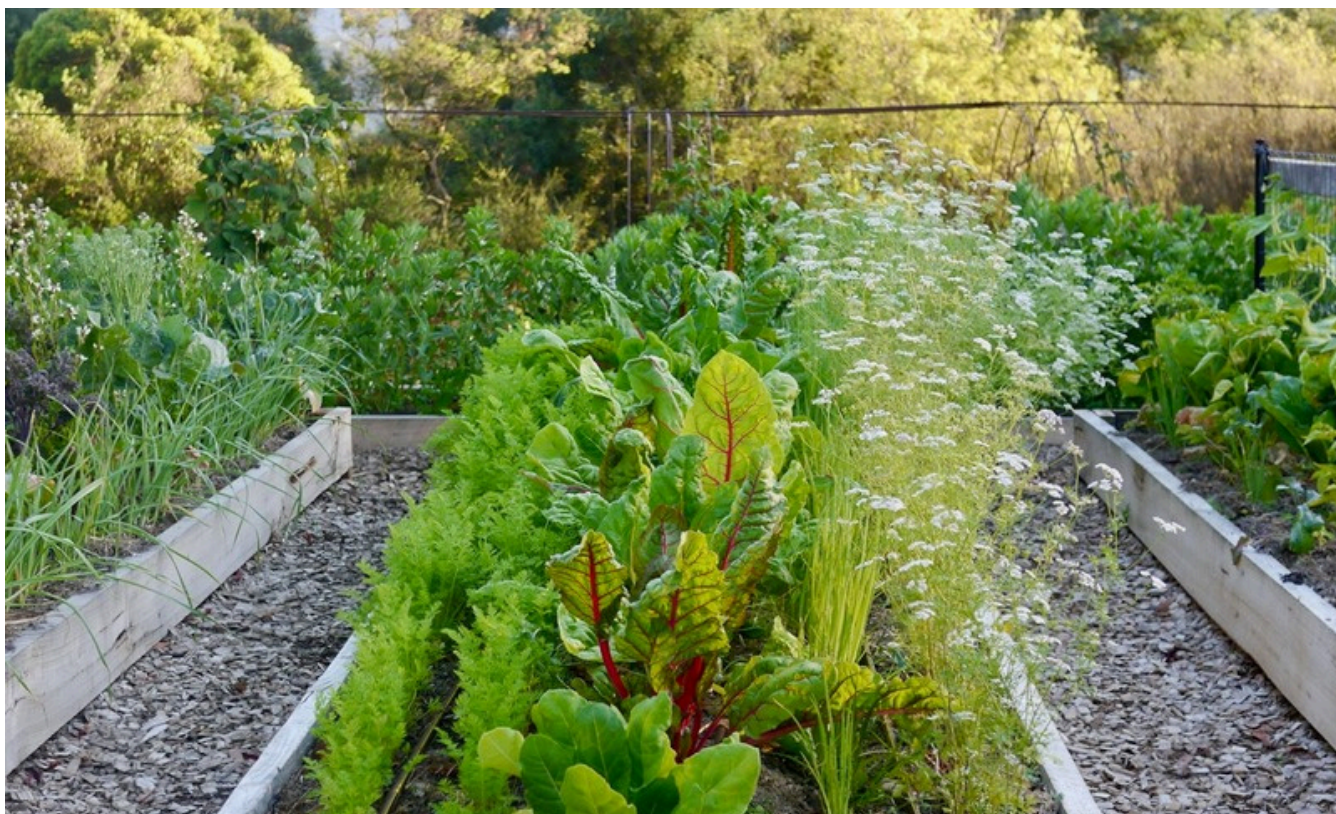
Designing Your Backyard Vegetable Garden



An introduction to getting started - so you can design your own backyard veggie patch - with joy, strategy, knowledge... and a little mud on your boots.



To Begin...



Designing your backyard vegetable garden can feel a little daunting – it's easy to wonder “surely I need a professional (or at least an app) to tell me what to put where?”

When actually... YOU are the expert for this design project.

You know what your needs are, what you like to eat, and how you like to spend your time.

You know what lifts your heart when you walk out the back door, first thing in the morning, and breathe in.

What lifts you, when you think of your (future) Garden?

- Maybe it's harvesting your first tomato
- Maybe it's a cosy spot for your morning cuppa.
- Maybe it's those first few flowers in spring...

Whatever your needs, wants, energy and abilities look like – **that's the knowing to begin from.**

This will help you design and create an amazing backyard garden that works for **you.**



Start with Design, Not Digging!

We know the feeling: that urgent, joyful itch to get growing – to tear into the lawn, build a garden bed, and plonk in your first seedlings.



Whether you're working with a sprawling backyard, a tiny courtyard, or a rented balcony, a good permaculture garden design process is your friend.

Designing your garden is about learning to see, to plan, and to imagine.



But before you get your hands grubby, let's take a breath. Starting with a solid garden design (even if it's a small one) gives you the best possible foundation.

A thoughtfully designed garden saves you time, money, and heartache later.

It helps you grow what you actually want and need, and it ensures your efforts work with your site – not against it.



So – in this Guide we'll cover:

- Learning to observe and understand your garden space
- Questions to help define your veggie garden goals
- Simple mapping tools to design with clarity
- How to use permaculture zones to place things well
- Creating a bubble diagram to plan your layout
- Tips for adapting tricky spaces and starting small
- How to take your rough design into a full garden plan.

How to use this guide:

- Print it out and take it with you to the kitchen table to discuss
- Grab a notebook and pencil, go outside, get quiet, and start dreaming!





Observation - Begin With Noticing

All good garden design begins with observation. This is your first job: take a long, slow walk around your space. Do it with fresh eyes, even if you've lived here for years.

Let yourself wander and wonder:

- Where does the sun hit the hardest?
- Where are the soggy patches after rain?
- Is one corner warmer than the rest?
- Where do you feel drawn to stand or sit?

Notice shadows from neighbouring buildings, scents on the breeze, visiting birds, or the sound of traffic.

Pay attention to which parts feel sheltered and which feel exposed.

Jot your impressions down. Snap photos.

Sketch. Scribble.

This isn't about creating a professional document – it's about getting intimate with your space.



Garden observations



Mapping sun and shade



Noting other outside forces



People: Who is This Vegetable Garden For?

Before we think about compost bins or fruit trees, let's consider the humans involved.

This garden exists for people – so start there. What do you (and your household) want and need from this space? Consider current needs and dream a little into the future.

Questions to ask:

- What foods do we love to eat?
- How much time can we spend here each week?
- Are there any mobility/accessibility needs?
- Do we want quiet reading corners? Wild spaces for kids? A place to cook or gather?

From these reflections, you can create a short garden goal statement – a few sentences describing your dream garden as if it already exists.

Goal statement example:

“In this garden, I grow salads and herbs that feed my household every day. There’s a shady nook where I sit with tea, and the kids harvest snow peas and chase butterflies.”

Great! Now – stick that statement on your fridge.

Your goal will become your compass, as you design your garden.

Actions you can take from here:

- Get some answers – interview the people who will use the garden and answer the Planning Questions.
- What matters most? – make a bullet list of the things that matter most to you and the people you share the space with.
- Write your goal statement – transform your bullet points into a Goal Statement.
- Consider your current priorities – write your Priority List.





Mapping Your Place

Now let's get practical. This is the bit of your design process where curiosity turns into strategy.

Create a Base Map

A base map is a simple bird's-eye-view of your space, showing what's already there: houses, sheds, fences, paths, big trees, tanks, driveways... anything fixed.

Use tracing paper or a printout from Google Maps, or sketch it by hand. Make several copies, you'll use them a **lot**.

Map Your Observations

Now, on your base map copies, start recording key site features:

- Sun & shade: Where gets full sun in winter? Where's always in shade?
- Water: Where are the taps, tanks, puddles or run-off lines?
- Wind: Any exposed corners or sheltered spots?
- Traffic & movement: Where do people walk? Kids play? Dogs run?
- Vegetation: What plants are already thriving? Which areas are bare?
- Views & vibes: What do you want to see more of... or block out?

Each of these themes can be explored on individual copies of the base map.

Once you're done, transfer the key details of each theme into one single Summary Map.

This becomes your design's goldmine.



Actions you can take:

- Make a simple Base Map of the area you're working in.
- Map your observations on copies of your Base Map. Group similar observations into themes, one theme per copy.
- Create your Summary Map.

Extra resources:

- [How to make a to-scale base map](#)
- [How to make a Summary Map](#)
- [Design Basics: Mapping the sun on your site](#) – Milkwood





Make Your Bubble Diagram

Time to design your Initial Concept Plan, also called a Bubble Diagram, or a Mud Map.

Gather:

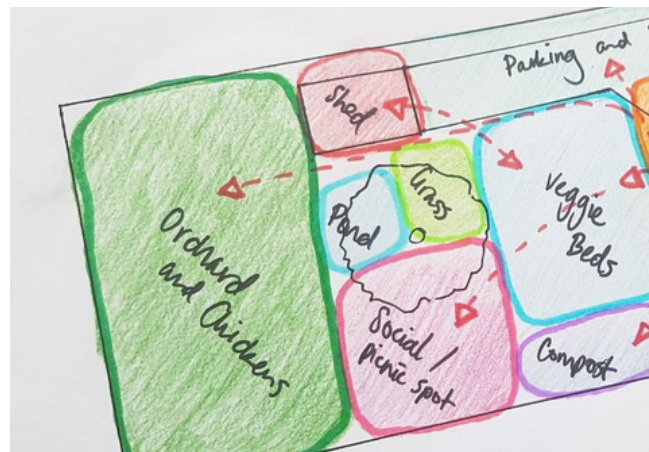
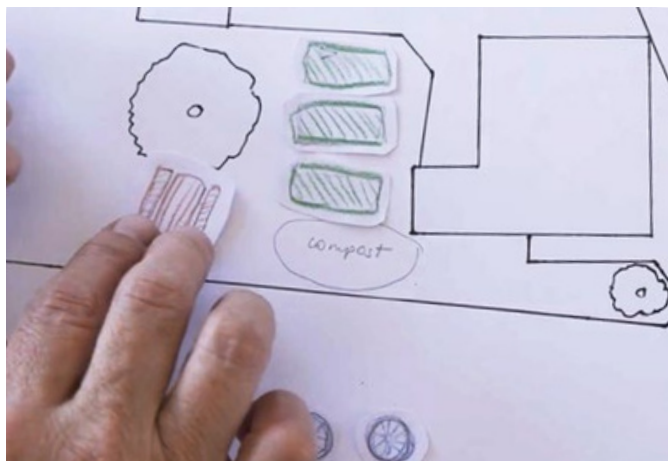
- Your goal statement
- Your planning questions
- Your summary map

Now sketch!

- Draw a bubble for each garden element: veggie patch, composting area, fruit trees, seating, water tank.
- Label them clearly.
- Draw arrows showing paths and access (for humans, wheelbarrows, pets, etc).

You're testing relationships here. Does the compost sit near the kitchen door? Is the chicken coop far enough from the neighbour's fence? Does your salad patch get 6 hours of sun?

This isn't the time for perfect measurements. It's the "how does it all fit together?" phase.



Tips and Tricks to Refine Your Design Layout

Design is play. Don't overthink it - try things, move them around, see how it feels. Try:

- Cut out paper pieces for your garden elements.
- Move them around your map until it "clicks."
- Tape down the best version and draw bubbles around them.

And then ask:

- What's closest to my kitchen door?
- Where do I want to walk each day?
- What's most important to me right now?

And if something in your space is fixed, like a shed casting a huge shadow, that's part of your design key. **Let these elements guide the rest of the layout.**

Download: [Making a Bubble Diagram](#)

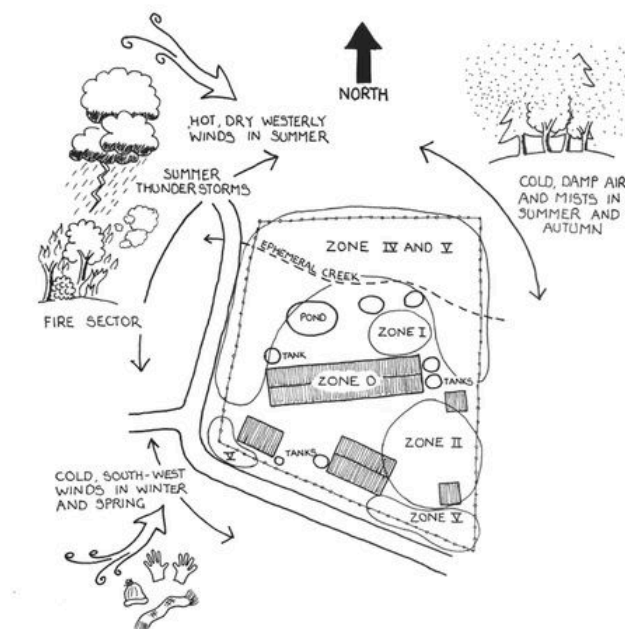


Understanding Permaculture Zones

Now, let's get clever with placement using permaculture zones.

These zones help us organise our gardens based on how often we use things.

- Zone 0: The home or central hub.
- Zone 1: The area just outside. Your daily-use zone – herbs, greens, compost, worm farms.
- Zone 2: Used slightly less – fruit trees, chickens, garden sheds, or the sidewalk out the front.
- Zones 3–5: Further out, less visited. Farms, firewood forests, wilder spaces, or your local bus stop.



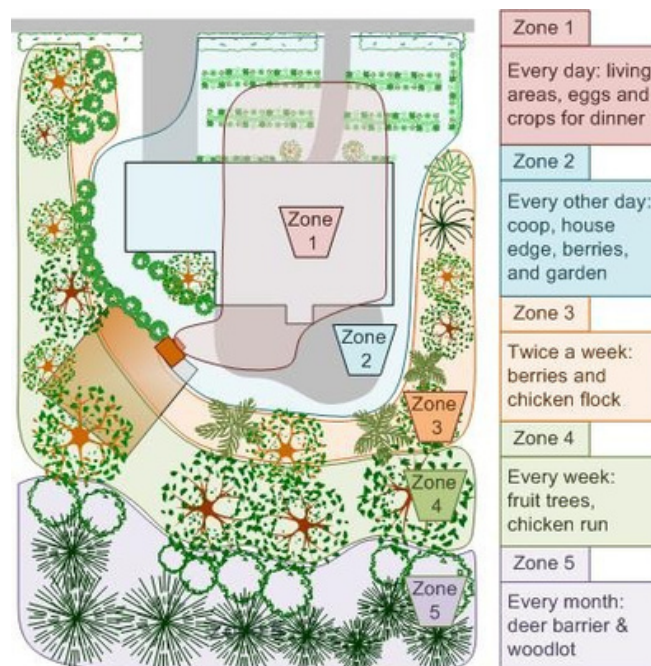
An example of permaculture zones on a 1/4 acre block at the edge of a village - Rosemary Morrow

Questions to ask:

- How often do we need to visit this thing?
- What's its yield? (Food, beauty, rest, shade?)
- What's its maintenance need?

Veggies and chickens need daily love.
Fruit trees, maybe weekly.

Place accordingly!



An example of urban zones in an inner-city block - The Plot Thickers



A Garden is Always Becoming...

Finished your bubble diagram? Great!
Now... test it out, in real life.

Use rope, chalk or sticks to mark your
planned garden areas.

Watch the space for a few days. Sit in it.

Notice how it feels at different times.
Adjust as needed.

Remember, this is just the beginning. As
your garden grows, so will your insights.



Observe. Interact. Adapt. Realign.

A garden's design is never final – it
evolves alongside you, through time and
space, as you grow.



Tricky site? No Worries

Not every garden starts as a blank canvas.
Many start as old lawns, concrete jungles,
or tangled messes.

**Whatever you've got, there's always a
way.**

Common challenges + first steps:

- Not enough sun? Plan to grow shade-tolerant herbs and greens. Reflect light with pale surfaces.
- Too wet? Look for drainage issues. Could you create a frog-friendly bog garden?
- Terrible soil? Start with raised beds or pots. Build soil with compost and cover crops.
- Too steep? Create terraces or step beds. Use the slope for water flow or vertical growing.



Take Stock of Where You're At

If you're feeling a little overwhelmed by all this info, that's okay. Let's take stock. Ask yourself:

- What's my available time?
- What's my budget?
- What's my current energy and health like?
- What skills do I have – or want to learn?

If money is tight, start with in-ground beds or container gardening.

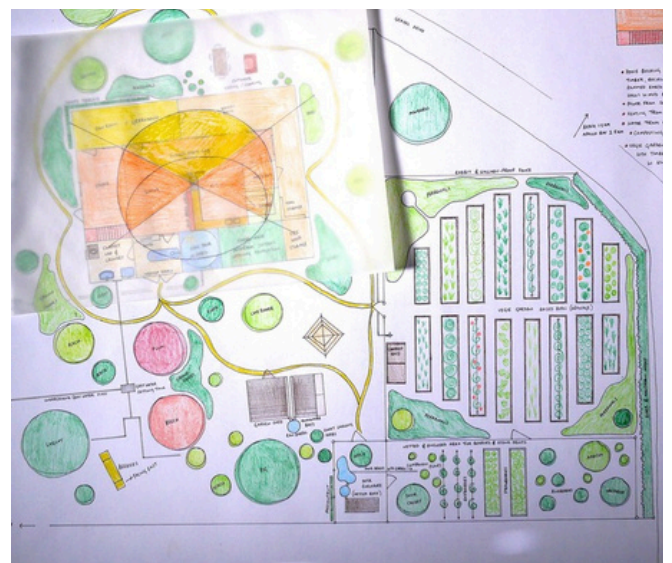
If you're short on time, choose low-maintenance crops like leafy greens or perennial herbs.

If your body needs gentle days, focus on accessibility – raised beds, vertical gardens, or working on small sections, close to home.

Start small if you need to. You can always expand later.

And once you're ready to keep going, you can:

Download: [Turn your to-scale base map into a detailed garden design](#)



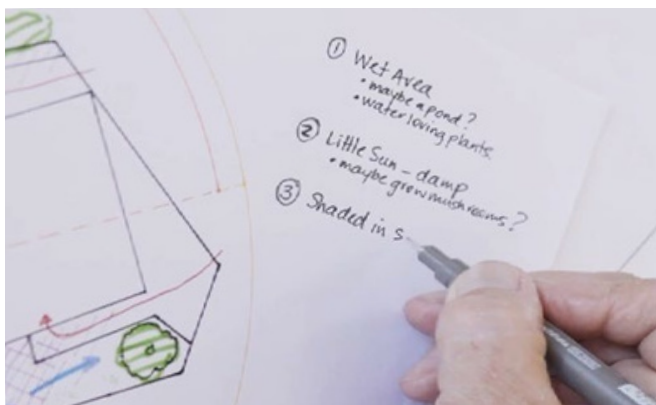


Final Thoughts: Your Garden, Your Way

You've now done the hard (but beautiful) thinking.

You've walked your land, listened to your people, drawn maps and dreamed dreams.

You've begun designing a garden that matches your life, your landscape, and your heart.



...picking fresh greens for dinner, hearing bees on the basil, watching friends munch snow peas under the sun.

Your garden doesn't need to be perfect. It's a relationship. Full of give and take, energy highs and lows.

And, if you tend it carefully, listening to yourself as you go – as well as the birds – your garden can feed your soul, as well as your household.

Thanks to the generosity of the land on which we all grow.

There will be seasons of abundance and seasons of scrappiness.

You'll learn from burnt lettuce, bolted coriander, and tangled tomato jungles. But you'll also find moments of pure joy...





Where To From Here?

To create this guide, we gathered and summarised a bunch of points from the design module of our Organic Vegetable Gardening course.



We've also included a few of the downloadable guides we give students that week, while they're working through the design process.

This free guide is just a teeny snippet of our course – where students from all over the world learn to design, build and plant their best-ever veggie garden!

If you're curious to learn more...

- Take a peek at the first video lesson from this module (Garden Design Fundamentals with Hannah).
- Join the waitlist for the next Organic Vegetable Gardening course
- Join our community Newsletter – it's packed with good ideas and inspiration.
- Explore all our Gardening resources, articles and how-tos.
- Download more of our free Gardening guides.
- Need extra help? Get in touch, and we'll point you to great resources for your context.

Because helping people to grow (veggies, mushrooms, community) is our jam.

x Kirsten + Nick- Milkwood.net

Made with love on melukerdee country, lutruwita
Tasmania

We acknowledge that permaculture owes the roots of its theory and practice to traditional and Indigenous knowledges, from all over the world.

We all stand on the shoulders of many ancestors – as we learn, and re-learn, these skills and concepts.

We pay our deepest respects and give our heartfelt thanks to these knowledge-keepers, both past and present.