Gardening on the Oregon coast

Gardening on the Oregon coast isn’t impossible. On the other hand, it isn’t easy. Wind, fog, and cool temperatures are obstacles to gardening success. However, if you match your plant needs and garden design to the coastal climate, gardening by the beach can be a rewarding experience.

Site selection
Make the most of available heat by planting on the south side of a wall or building. Plastic hotcaps, cloches, row covers, or small greenhouses can modify the planting environment to increase heat. Be sure to provide ventilation when using plastic covering or plants will dry out.

Soil preparation and fertility
Many coastal soils are sandy and don’t hold water well. Gardens on these soils need additional organic matter and frequent watering during the drier summer months.

Lettuce and other cool-weather crops grow well in coastal Oregon’s climate.
A lack of nutrients limits plant growth in any gardening environment. Be sure to apply adequate fertilizer to coastal gardens during the growing season.

**Choice of crop varieties**

A key detail in coastal gardening success is the selection of appropriate varieties. Cole crops, root crops, lettuce, peas, spinach, zucchini, leeks, and onions do well here. Tomatoes and corn will do well if you use short-season varieties and some type of row covering to speed germination and early growth.

**Climate and seasonal issues**

Lack of sunlight and warmth often are limiting factors on the coast. Sometimes, removing trees will make a big difference. Orienting garden rows in a north-south direction helps maximize sunlight to all parts of the garden.

Heavy rainfall in the spring is a problem where soils drain slowly. Add organic matter and use raised beds to improve soil drainage and speed up soil warming.

Wind protection is essential on the coast. Wind causes moisture to evaporate from plant leaves more quickly than roots can take in new moisture. This causes drought stress, which in windy areas can occur even when the ground is saturated with moisture. Place small fences, tires, shade cloth, snow fencing, or other objects around plants to break the wind.

---

**Gardening in the Rogue Valley**

Gardeners in the Rogue Valley enjoy an excellent climate for gardening and a wide variety of fertile valley soils. Warm, sunny weather in late spring, summer, and early fall provides good growing conditions with a minimum of garden plant diseases. Year-round gardening is possible, with mild winters where temperatures seldom drop below 20°F.

**Site selection**

Due to variations in the topography of the valley floor, foothills, and mountainous areas, and in tree density on forested sites, the Rogue Valley offers varied microclimates of sunlight exposure, temperature, humidity, and air drainage.

Select your garden site with care and take advantage of the climatic variation within your yard. It may determine your success as a gardener. For example, the south side of a house or slope is warmer than the north side. A southern exposure receives maximum sunlight.

Plant crops that like more warmth in an area with southern exposure. Plant shade-tolerant leafy vegetables on the north side of a building or on a north slope.

Locate your garden where it will receive at least 6 hours of sunlight each day (8 to 10 hours is preferred). Avoid planting vegetables near buildings or trees that shade your garden. In addition, the roots of nearby trees and shrubs will rob vegetables of nutrients and water.

Avoid frost pockets or areas that warm slowly in the spring. Frost will build up in areas lacking air drainage, such as low spots at the base of a hill or at the foot of a slope bordered by a solid fence.
Wherever you locate your garden, be sure a readily available supply of water is nearby. Garden soil on hot and windy sites in the Rogue Valley can lose up to a ½ inch of water per day. Since there is very little rainfall during the summer, watering is necessary at planting time and throughout the summer. If watering your garden is difficult and time-consuming, it will become more work than you want to do during the hot days of July and August.

**Soil preparation and fertility**

Rogue Valley soils range from sandy loam to heavy clay. Most of the clay soils originate from rocks of ancient volcanic activity in the Cascade Mountains. Granite soils are from older, more durable and slowly weathered rocks of the Siskiyou Mountains. The granite rock materials formed sandy loam soils
that drain well but are not as rich in nutrients as clay soils. Gardeners usually prefer loam or sandy soils.

Clay soils drain and dry slowly. When wet, they are sticky and difficult to garden. “Heavy” clay soils live up to their name when gardeners try working them too early in the spring. If you work clay soil when it’s too wet, it will make a poor seedbed of hard clods. Prepare garden soil when it’s no longer sticky and when a handful squeezed together doesn’t form a hard lump.

Soils that drain well will warm faster in the spring, but may become too warm for some crops during midsummer. Experienced gardeners rotate from cool- to warm-season crops in early summer to gain the advantage of increased soil temperature.

Improve clay soils by adding organic matter, an excellent soil amendment regardless of soil type. In well-drained granite soils, it improves water retention, while in heavy clay soils it improves soil drainage.

**Climate and seasonal issues**

The Rogue Valley climate is influenced by the nearby Pacific Ocean, with its marine warmth in winter and cool but dry air in summer. The moderating air mass is carried onshore by prevailing westerly winds.

The frost-free period is 165 to 170 days, beginning about the first of May and ending in mid- to late October. This varies slightly from one location to another. These dates are critical for tomatoes, corn, potatoes, squash, cucumbers, and other warm-season crops susceptible to frost injury. Try to select vegetable varieties that will mature within the frost-free period.

Plant corn and potatoes around mid-April even though near- or below-freezing temperatures still might occur. The first plants may be nipped back, but damage will be minimal and plants will continue to grow and emerge from the ground as the weather warms.

Other warm-season crops do best with mid-May to early June plantings, when there is less chance of frost and soil is warmer.

During early summer, these cool nights may prevent fruit set for crops such as tomatoes. Sufficiently warm nights eventually will prevail, however, and tomato fruit will be set by midsummer.

In spite of some warm midsummer days, the growing season’s average daily temperature is 70°F. Warm days are offset by cool nights, as cold air drains down from surrounding mountain slopes.

Rogue Valley fall weather is ideal for cool-season crops. Try a midsummer planting for fall harvest. Midsummer planting of cool-season spring crops also is recommended where soggy soils prevent early gardening.

It’s possible to grow winter garden crops successfully in the Rogue Valley during most years, and such crops can be grown in the valley consistently if they are given some protection, particularly on days of extreme low temperatures. Although annual extreme lows range between 10 and 20°F, the average daily low dips only slightly below freezing during December and January.

Since 75 percent of the average annual rainfall comes between November and March, take advantage of breaks in the weather to prepare your garden for a mid-February planting of peas and onions. Avoid early planting in areas that remain soggy after a rain.

**Cool nights in early summer can delay fruit set on tomatoes, but tomatoes will set on by midsummer, giving them time to ripen during the warm, sunny days of early fall.**

**Corn can be planted in mid-April even though nighttime temperatures still are cool.**
Although it may not be a gardening paradise, central and eastern Oregon is more than a wide expanse of high desert. Successful vegetable and fruit gardening is possible east of the Cascades if you take into account the area’s special and widely varying climate and soil characteristics.

Soil preparation and fertility

Soils in central and eastern Oregon vary widely. Light-textured soils, low in organic matter, nutrient content, and water-holding capacity, are found in parts of central Oregon and the eastern Columbia Basin. These soils may require frequent applications of fertilizer and water. At the other extreme are heavy soils high in soluble salts (which can create an alkalinity problem).

Added organic matter such as manure or compost generally is beneficial for most central and eastern Oregon soils. Specific information for each area is available from county offices of the OSU Extension Service or from local garden centers.

Choice of crop varieties

Concentrate on vegetables adapted to your area. Avoid planting vegetables that require special, intense, or improved growing conditions. Root crops (e.g., potatoes, carrots, and beets) and cold-tolerant crops (e.g., cabbage, chard, leaf lettuce, and kohlrabi) do well in high-elevation gardens.

Cold-tolerant crops such as cabbage, chard, leaf lettuce, and kohlrabi do well in high-elevation gardens.
Short-season vegetable varieties offer the best chance of success. For example, cool nights during the growing season may cause a 65-day tomato to require 75 to 80 days or more to mature.

**Planting at the right time**

Planting dates for high-elevation, short-season areas generally lag behind those in other parts of the state. In high areas, gardens usually are planted from mid-May, for cold-tolerant plants, to mid-June. Later plantings often fail to mature before fall frosts.

Use plant protection devices, such as row covers, hotcaps, and Walls-o-Water, to extend the growing season for vegetables requiring longer periods to mature.

In areas along the Columbia River, where the growing season approaches or exceeds 120 days, planting dates can be moved up to early May.

**Climate and seasonal issues**

The growing season may be as short as 80 to 90 days in central Oregon at elevations above 3,500 feet. In some of the lower elevations and river valleys, growing seasons may exceed 130 days.

Also, large fluctuations in daytime and nighttime temperatures, often as much as 40–45°F, affect vegetable and fruit production. Cool nights reduce the chances of successfully growing vegetables that like warm nights, such as lima beans and eggplants.

Gardening along the Columbia

For gardens in lower elevation areas along the Columbia River, frost and cold are not the main enemy. In the river gorge, beginning in mid-spring and extending through summer, heat and steady winds create problems for gardeners trying to establish fruit and vegetable plantings.

Starting a garden in a steady 20-mile-per-hour breeze with temperatures approaching the mid-80s can be a challenge. Frequent, light watering is the only way to keep seedlings from drying out. Place a rock or secure a roofing shingle on the windward side of seedlings to break the wind and help plants become established.

As the season progresses and temperatures rise above 100°F, protection from heat becomes critical. Plants can wilt and die quickly if not properly cared for. Give established plants plenty of water. Watering 60 to 90 minutes at a time, three times a week, will keep plants growing vigorously.

For season-long protection from the wind, plant a hedge that will grow 4 to 5 feet high on the west side of the garden. It will provide some wind protection yet allow plenty of light to reach garden plants.