Site Evaluation

Evaluating your landscape and selecting a garden site

OVERVIEW

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Gardeners will be able to assess their landscape and climate and understand how to most efficiently grow food in this environment.

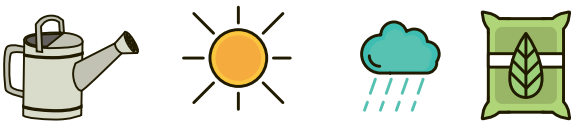
DURATION

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A shaded area for gathering together to discuss

KEY CONCEPTS

Plants, just like people, have some basic needs that need to be taken care of in order for them to thrive.



- They need water, nutrients, air, light, and protection from damage.
- The basic needs of plants tell us the key criteria for selecting a good site for our home garden. We need a site with good soil, easy access to water and nutrients, enough sunshine and with protection from animals, strong winds, and rain.
- By carefully considering these criteria and observing our land, we can select a good site for our home garden. This will allow plants to thrive while we spend as little energy as possible maintaining them.

TRAINING AGENDA

1	Introduction	DISCUSSION	10 min
2	Basic needs of plants	DISCUSSION	30 min
3	Identify the best site for a home garden	PRACTICAL ACTIVITY	1 hour
4	Closing discussion	DISCUSSION	10 min

FACILITATOR NOTES

Encourage gardeners to engage and discuss as much as possible. They are the ones with the local knowledge of the landscape so their input is essential.

10 min

1. Introduction and warm-up

Welcome gardeners to the training. Do a brief introduction to today's topic and review the training agenda. You may want to outline the training agenda on your flipchart or board so gardeners can see it when they arrive.

Conduct a warm-up exercise or ice-breaker to make sure all gardeners feel welcome and are ready to fully participate. Suggested warm-up and ice-breaker activities can be found in the Facilitator's Guide: Encouraging Learning through Participant Engagement.

Participant Engagement Guide

30 min

2. Basic needs of plants

INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION

GOAL OF DISCUSSION: Gardeners learn that plants, just like people, have basic needs that need to be taken care of in order for them to thrive. Gardeners can successfully select a site for their gardens by thinking first about these basic needs and how to satisfy them.

1. Engage gardeners in an interactive discussion around:
   - The basic needs of plants
   - How these needs compare with the needs of humans
   - What these needs tell us about the key criteria for selecting a site for a home garden

KEY MESSAGES

Plants have very similar needs as humans and livestock. They all need adequate water, food, air, protection, and care to thrive.

We can ensure that our gardens are set up for success by taking care where we place our gardens.

Given these basic needs, the key criteria for selecting our garden sites should be spaces that provide:

- **Accessibility to all household members** for easy maintenance and harvesting
- **Good quality soil** that is free of stones
- Easy **access to water**
- Easy **access to nutrients** – can a compost be placed near?
  How else will nutrients enter the garden soil?
- At least **five hours of direct sunlight** a day, but also not too exposed to strong sun.
  If strong sun, then partial shading is desired.
- **Protection from livestock and theft** – is there room for a fence?
- **Protection from strong winds and potential flooding**

1 hour

3. Identifying the best site for a home garden

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

GOAL OF ACTIVITY: Encourage gardeners to stop and observe their landscape before selecting a garden site. If we take time to observe and evaluate our site and understand the flow of water, how the sun moves across the land, and the quality of the soil and access to water, then we can choose a site for our garden that will be provide a good home for our plants and allow them to thrive. In addition, by carefully choosing a site for our garden, we will ultimately reduce the time, energy and cost required to set it up and maintain it.

STEP 1. Walk with gardeners around the homestead to identify the best site for a home garden. Ask them to keep the key criteria for a home garden in mind.

STEP 2. During the walk, probe gardeners with questions to help their critical evaluation of the landscape:

1. How does rainwater naturally move across the landscape?
   How can the rainwater be stopped, slowed and spread effectively?
2. Is there any place on the land that tends to flood during the rainy season?
3. Is there a water point such as a well, a river or a rainwater tank?
4. Is there a slope? Does the site need terracing?
5. Is there easy access to manure and/or compost?
6. Is there a flow of nutrients we can make use of?
7. Is there easy access to mulch material?
8. What is the soil quality?
   - Is the soil soft and worked already or hard?
   - Is there evidence of soil life in the soil?
   - Is the soil sandy and dry or moist and full or organic matter?
   - Are there signs of soil erosion?

STEP 3. Split gardeners up into groups of 2 or 3 and discuss where the best site for a home garden would be while considering the key criteria. Encourage them to walk around if they feel it necessary.

STEP 4. Gather with gardeners again and ask each group to give their suggestion for the best site. Ask them to explain why they feel that site is the best. Agree with gardeners on a site for the garden.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING A GARDEN SITE

RAINWATER: Water moves from the highest point to the lowest point in a landscape. If there is a slope on the land, water will move to the lowest point and cause erosion of precious topsoil. By digging a ditch perpendicular to the slope ("on contour"), water running down the slope can be slowed, sunk into the soil, and spread across the land. If we dig this ditch above where we put our garden we will protect the garden from flooding and 'bank' water in the soil for the plants to use.

FLOODING: If there are places on the land that tends to flood we should not put our gardens there. Diversion drains can help divert some of the water from the area that tends to flood.

TERRACING: The garden needs to be on as flat land as possible, otherwise the soil will wash away. If the land is on a steep slope there may be a need to terrace the land in order to have a home garden.

EASY ACCESS TO MANURE AND COMPOST: If we place the garden near the compost or manure heap it will reduce the energy spent getting the compost to the garden.

EASY ACCESS TO MULCH MATERIAL: Mulch such as dried leaves or grasses help reduce evaporation and adds organic matter to the soil. Identifying sources of mulch is important for our garden.

FLOW OF NUTRIENTS: A compost heap or a heap of manure contains nutrients for the soil. When it rains some of those nutrients will flow away with the rain water. By placing a garden site down slope from a chicken coop or a compost heap, the nutrients will flow down with rainwater into our gardens so we can use them effortlessly.

SOIL QUALITY: We need good quality soil for our home garden. If the soil is degraded, very compacted, sandy, or very dry then it will require a lot of work to build a garden. If there is a site on the land where the soil is good this may be a good place to start the garden.

You may find that there is a site with good soil but it tends to flood or is far away from the house. Likewise, there may be a site near the compost heap, but it is very steep and requires a lot of work to terrace it and the soil is degraded. Selecting a site is about balancing all the considerations and finding the site that works best for you. Our goal is to meet the basic needs of plants with as little additional effort on our parts as possible.

10 min

5. Closing discussion

Ask gardeners to share with the group:

1. Something they learned in the session
2. How they are going to use this in their own homestead

NEXT GUIDE: Establishing Your Garden