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Vegetables need space to grow, but many times it's just not practical to start seeds off at their final spacing. Plants that are direct seeded in the ground, especially seeds of root vegetables, will need to be thinned out. Thinning produces healthier plants and higher yields by: allowing room for proper growth, reducing competition from nearby plants for water and nutrients, and allowing for good air circulation between plants.

Seedlings are usually thinned once they have 1-2 sets of true leaves. Most will be 2-3 inches tall by then and easy enough to grasp and pull.

Thinning when the soil is damp and loose will help you pull just the extra plants while leaving the ones you want to keep.

Thinning in the evening gives the remaining plants a chance to adjust before being in the heat and sunlight.

Leafy vegetables, like lettuce and spinach, can be thinned by gently pulling the unwanted plants. If you are growing in squares, not rows, you can try simply running a flexible rake through the seedlings. Plants won't be perfectly spaced, but it will open more space for them to grow.

Root vegetables, like onions and beets, can be more sensitive to thinning because disturbing the young roots can deform them. Transplanting long rooted vegetables, like carrots and turnips, will cause them to fork. You'll want to pull one seedling at a time or cut the unwanted seedlings with scissors instead of pulling them out. Spacing varies by varieties and by whether you want your vegetables to grow to full size, but in general, leave enough room for the vegetable to mature plus a couple of inches on either side. See the Growing Guide for spacing details.

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GROWING GUIDE | PAGES Vegetable Guide | 23-55

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