



Food Gardening Basics

One of the best ways to eat healthy, save money and find some stress relief all at the same time is to start a food garden. You don't need to have any prior experience with growing food to get started, either.

All you need are some fundamental instructions and a little bit of planning and you'll be able to grow your own food from seed to plate in no time. Every season, you'll be able to boost the nutrients you consume and cut back on your spending for pricey produce.

Planning Your Gardening Growing Space

Once you decide that you want to grow your own garden, the first step is to determine what type of garden you're going to build and where the location will be. Some beginners grow their garden indoors.

This option is chosen for the purpose of saving money, while still having healthy fruits and vegetables to eat. It's also a choice made because raising an indoor garden can be easier on those who can't necessarily get around as well physically.

This type of garden can be grown by anyone of any age. When you create an indoor garden, you'll have some of the same growing needs to consider that you would have if you planted an outdoor garden.



Image by Enginursday: Aquaponics in Bloom - www.sparkfun.com/news/2045

You'll need to determine a container system. Many indoor gardens are hydroponic ones. This means that soil isn't used as part of the growing process. By using a hydroponic system, your plants grow quickly, but they do require power to grow. This is not one of the cheapest methods to use for growing an indoor garden.

Some people use an aquaponics system, which works hand in hand to grow plants by using a fish aquarium. Container gardening is something that can be used indoor or outdoor.

You can use window boxes, pots, planters, or baskets. You can use barrels, plastic containers and more. Nearly anything can be used as long as it has a proper drainage system.

Image by [Nadine Schaeffer](#)



You can create a tower garden in order to grow plants. This means that you're growing things vertically rather than horizontally. This allows you to grow more plants in less space, so it's a great idea for things like small apartment patios or other homes with limited room to grow a garden.

You can even grow a tower garden in a corner of your kitchen if you want to have it inside rather than outside.

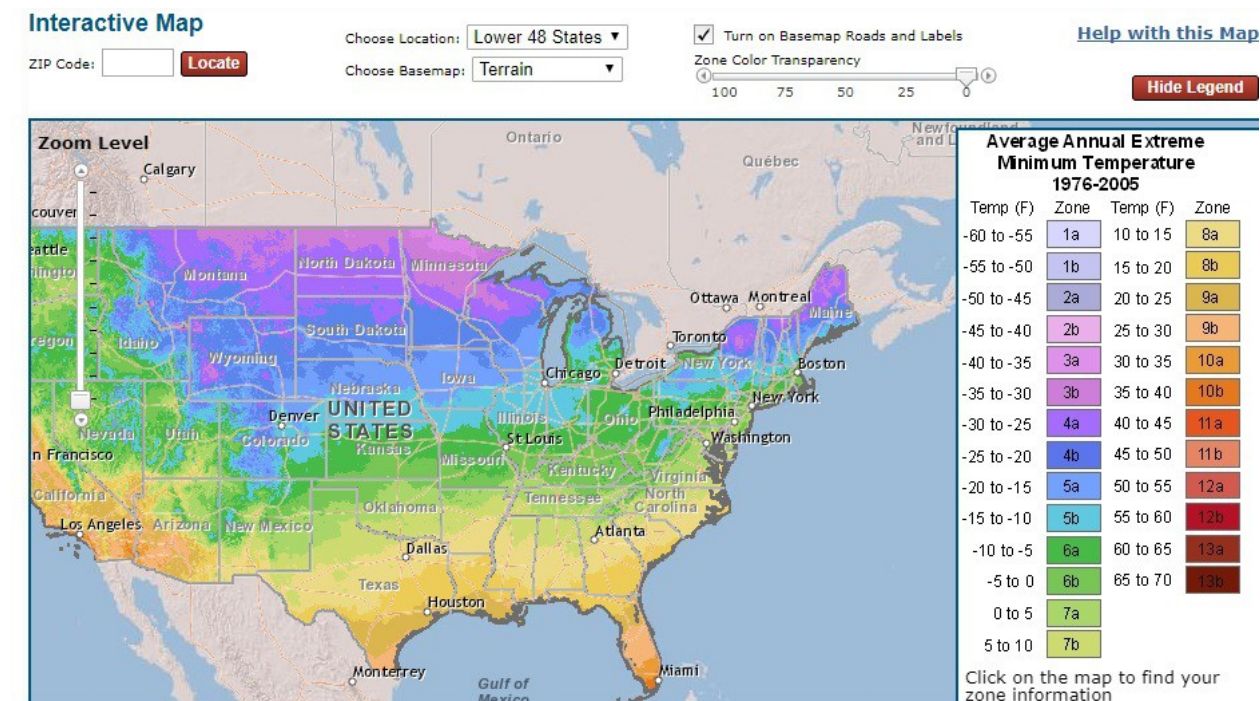
Raised bed gardening is where you plant things in areas built up over your soil.

Usually these are pre-built containers made of wood or other materials in square or rectangular shapes. These are lined with things like wood chips or grass clippings, covered with cardboard, and then filled with soil. They save you from having to prepare poor soil. I'm all for that!

Using raised beds can allow garden plants to thrive better, which is one reason they're so popular. If you choose to, you can even use a combination approach to gardening. You can have both an indoor and an outdoor garden.

You can also have a mixture of growing methods. You might rely on container gardening for inside your home or on your back porch, while still using a raised bed in the backyard at the same time.

Understanding Your Growing Schedule



Being new to gardening means you'll have to learn some things in order to ensure success. One of these things is knowing the growing schedule you live in. There's a commonly used way to understand the best time of the year to grow your garden if you're planting outside.

There's a grow zone map also known as the USDA Hardiness Zone Map that teaches gardeners what time of the year a garden should be planted in order for the plants to thrive.

Each of the 11 areas on the map is divided into zones based on temperature. Once you understand the planting zones, this can give you the knowledge you need to raise a healthy garden.

All plants have a growing climate and in order for them to grow well you have to mimic that climate. That means the plant has to be able to withstand the heat for your zone as well as the cold.

That's why, when you buy plants or seeds, there's usually information that features the growing zone or climate conditions for the plant's survival. Because there are different grow zones, you have to locate yours before you plant.

To do this, you can pull up the grow zone map and put in your zip code. States will vary with planting time, even when they're on the same side of the map. For example, in North Carolina, you could plant a garden outdoors in the early to late spring.

But in Michigan, you should wait until the first week of May. That's because the temperatures are different in these states. States that are in the north have colder climates.

You can have snow later in the year, which interferes with a plant's ability to survive. So you would have to wait until later to plant. A good rule of thumb to remember is to base your growing season on how far north you live.

If you live in a state known for snowfall, you would need to extend planting time by a few weeks or more. Several states are lumped into the zones. For example, southern states are in Zone 9 through 11.

This doesn't mean that the states are divided for gardening zones strictly by where the state is located on the map. California and Florida are on opposite sides of the map, yet they're both within the same zone because they have similar temperatures.

But, that doesn't mean that you could follow the same gardening advice for both states. You would also have to take into consideration the amount of rainfall that the state receives. This should be part of your decision making when you're choosing which plants you want to use to set up your garden.



Making Sure Your Soil Is Ready

Your soil is the foundation that will determine if your garden grows successfully or not. It provides the nutrients that are needed to give and nurture plant life. If your soil isn't ready, then you can end up with a limited harvest, weak plants and you may not be able to grow anything well.

This is why, before you decide to plant anything, you'll want to test your soil. By testing your soil, you'll be able to pinpoint problems that could cause your plants to struggle. The tests can show you if there are problems with nutrients or if the acidity of the soil is out of balance.

By checking the pH levels, you'll know if your soil is ready or not. You can do the tests on your own or you can use a kit where you place a sample of the soil in it and mail it off to be tested.

If you decide to send the soil off to be tested, make sure that you don't just choose soil in one area. Instead, the test needs an idea of what the general condition of the soil is overall, because there are certain things that can change the soil's health level.

For example, soil that's been used in the past for planting and has been exposed to fertilizer, composting, etc. can have different pH levels than soil that's in another area. You want your garden's soil to be healthy from one end to the other, not just in spots.

When taking the sample, don't simply skim soil from the top. Your plants don't just live on the top. You need to check to see how deep the root system of the plants will be that you plan to use in your garden.

Check the health of the soil at that level. That means you'll have to dig down to get a usable sample. If you find that your soil isn't ready, you'll need to fix it. Give the soil the nutrients that it needs in order to grow a healthy garden.

You can do this by using compost to cover your soil.

Don't use a manufactured fertilizer if you haven't tested your soil first. Some chemical fertilizers can make bad soil worse rather than helping to restore it.

Make sure that you mulch your garden when you're not planting. You can use lawn clippings and leaves to do this with. This mulch acts as a protective layer for the soil and restores nutrients at the same time.

If you've had the soil tested and the test shows that your soil's pH levels are off, you'll need to fix this. Keep in mind that the more chemical ingredients you've used on your soil in the past, the more damage that may have been done.

Acidic soil is determined by where it falls on the pH scale. If the test shows your soil level is between 0-7, then your soil is considered to be acidic. Correcting a wrong PH balance is a simple and inexpensive fix. You just need to add lime. You can buy limestone at your local garden or home improvement store.

Composting and Fertilizing to Keep Your Soil Rich and Healthy

One of the basics of food gardening is getting the soil prepared. You can get yours prepared by using compost and fertilizer. Being new to gardening, you may not know exactly what it means to use composting or even what it is.

Composting, at its basic definition, means using dead matter to grow plants. It's a form of recycling what's natural. Compost can contain things like bacteria as well as scraps from your kitchen.

When you use this method to help your garden, you're allowing matter to decompose in order to give nutrients to the soil. The material in composting offers a lot of benefits for gardening.

Getting started with composting isn't difficult. You can purchase compost if you choose to, but there's not really a need unless you just want to make the process more convenient.

The matter that goes into compost can vary according to what you put into it. You can use peelings from everyday foods like vegetables including the core of the vegetables. You can also use fruits.

You can even use your old coffee grounds or tea grounds. You can also use things like bread to make your compost pile. To get started, you would need a composting bin or you can start a compost pile on the ground.

But if you choose to use the ground and put scraps on that, you do run the risk of attracting animals. Start by putting the kitchen scraps into the bin. You can add composting material such as lawn clippings to your scraps.

Compost must be turned regularly about once a week. This step is what helps the material to mix correctly. The turning process is also why some people choose to use compost tumblers that they can turn by hand in order to properly mix the matter.

There are some mistakes that you'll want to avoid with composting. Don't turn the composting too often. This can interfere with the compost's heating step and prevent the fungi from growing like it should.

Another mistake to avoid is to make sure you don't put meat in your composting bin. In a compost bin, meat has a strong odor that can cause your compost to be attacked by animals or rodents that are attracted by the scent.

Some people think that compost and fertilizer are the same thing, but they're not. You don't use fertilizer to make your soil ready. You use fertilizer to help your plants grow. Fertilizer is meant to accurately give the plants all the nutrients they need.

It contains things like nitrogen, potassium and sulfur, which plants need and may not get from the soil or composting. Avoid common fertilizer mistakes such as buying poor quality fertilizer or thinking that giving the plants more is better. Too much fertilizer can harm plants and even cause them to die.

Growing Plants from Seed

There are plenty of reasons you'll want to grow plants from seeds. If you shop for plants to use in your garden, then you have to take whatever is available. You might not even be able to get the ones that you want.

But when you use seeds, you can choose from a variety of items to plant in your garden. You won't have to choose just one kind of the same plant, either. For example, if you like slicing tomatoes and cherry tomatoes, you can easily find seeds for both and you can find them in different colors, too.

When you choose to grow plants from seed, you're not spending as much money, either. Buying plants always costs more. Seeds are hardy enough to stay viable for years to come.

Plus, you get more harvest from using seeds than you do plants. Depending on the type of seeds you buy, you'll be able to continually use the plants to keep using seeds for future gardens.

Having seeds allows you to know that you can plant a garden and reap the harvest. This will ensure that you have food to eat in the event that you can't get to the store or the store doesn't have the produce that you want.

You'll have a choice to make when it comes to which seeds to buy. You can choose to get organic ones, hybrid, heirloom and non-GMO. Heirloom seeds are open pollinated, which means they've been around for years.

Hybrid seeds are a cross between different plants. Non-GMO seeds mean they haven't been genetically modified. When you're buying seeds, you want to be sure that you purchase ones that are designed to use for your specific planting area.

If you don't, you might accidentally end up with plants that will struggle to survive in your region and may even fail to yield a crop. Pick a variety of seeds from foods that you know you're going to eat.

If you buy seeds for foods you don't like, you won't end up eating the harvest. Avoid common mistakes that beginning gardeners often make with seeds. Don't immediately plant your seeds outside.

You need to check to make sure that the planting time is right according to your zone. Not all seeds can be planted outside right away. Some of them need time to germinate first.

You'll need to grow them into seedlings inside first. Don't plant the seed beyond the level where it should go. Make sure when you plant the seeds that you're not planting them so deep that the seed cannot sprout.

Don't overwater. Follow the correct watering amount for the plant. Remember that seeds and seedlings need light. Be sure that you also give the plant the correct amount of sunlight the seed packet says it needs.

Starting Your Garden with Plants

If you prefer to use plants rather than seeds in your garden, you can do that, too. Choosing the plants you want to use is just a matter of preference. Pick the plants that are going to grow the fruits or vegetables that you normally buy anyway.

If you use a lot of tomatoes, then buy tomato plants. If you use a lot of herbs, then buy herbs to plant. You can plant green beans, bell peppers, and broccoli and end up using your garden to add healthy dishes to your meals.

Plus, you'll save money on your grocery bill. Whatever you use or want to eat, you can find a plant for. Always choose your plants according to the amount of crop you think it'll produce in relation to whether or not you'll be able to use the amount produced.

There are vegetables that have limited crop yield, such as carrots, while other types like squash will keep on growing. Choose plants according to the type of growing conditions you have in your area.

The plants that you choose must be able to co-exist with each other. Some plants don't grow well with others and can even prevent certain plants from growing. For example, you shouldn't plant potatoes along with tomatoes in the same row.

So always look for plants that get along if you plan to share grow slots. As a beginner, you want to choose plants that are easy to grow. This means picking plants that are known to be hardy so that if you don't do everything by the book, the plant can still survive.

Plants like carrots are easy to grow, while celery is tougher to grow. When planting outside, make sure that it's the right time. If you're moving seedlings outside, you don't want to do this too early.

You can tell if it's okay to put a seedling outside by checking the leaves. If the plant has at least three true leaves, it can be planted. These leaves have usually sprouted within 3 weeks.

Before putting out the plants or seedlings, check your soil temperature. Soil that's either too cold or too hot can damage the roots of a plant. Dig the holes for your plants, remove the plant from the container, being gentle with the roots, and set the plant into the hole.

It's a common mistake to believe you need to pry the roots apart or break up a root ball. You don't need to do this and can cause the plant to wither if you break the roots. Place soil around the plant and water it. If you notice that the plant shows signs of wilting or yellowing, it's dealing with transplant shock and needs to be treated for that.



Make Sure You're Not Over or Under Watering Your Garden

The key to a successful, bountiful harvest is giving the plants what they need to thrive. Water is essential to plant life, but it has to be the right amount of water. On average, your garden needs to be watered according to the condition of the soil.

There is some advice that states you should water the garden regularly with a certain number of inches, but there's no set amount that works for all gardens. You can easily end up over or under watering if you follow a set rule.

The best way is to test the soil to see how much moisture it has. To do this, you just go out to the garden and scoop a fistful of soil into your hand. Give it a squeeze. If the soil sticks together and you can keep it formed, then it means that the soil has plenty of moisture.

If you try to squeeze the soil together, but it won't hold, that's a sign that your garden needs watering. There are factors that go into telling how much water you need to provide or not.

If your soil is sandy, you'll need more water. The type of environment that you live in can also affect the amount of water you should give your garden. If you live in a state that gets a lot of cloud cover and plenty of rain, you're not going to need to water as often.

However, if you live in a dry, hot state, then you're going to have to provide more water for your plants. The season that you're in can also be a factor. So can natural changes, such as extreme temperatures.

Keep in mind that if you do get a lot of rainfall in your area, you may want to invest in a rain gauge so you can tell how much water your garden is getting. This will come in handy if, later on, it's determined that your garden is getting too much water.

You'll be able to take steps to prevent this. Your garden will let you know how its faring when it comes to watering. You'll see signs. If the garden is getting too much water, the roots of the plants are drowning.

You'll notice that the leaves start to turn yellow. The plant will begin to shrivel or wilt. The growth will become stunted. You may also notice the growth of algae or fungus on the plant or the soil.

Water helps your plants use the nutrients from the soil. Without enough, growth will slow or stop. When you're not giving your garden enough water, you'll notice the soil around the plants is cracked.

Another sign is that your plants will wilt in the heat. The edges of the leaves will start to turn brown, then they'll die off if you don't correct the issue. The plant will begin to droop and then die.



Keeping Pests Away from Your Edible Garden

Whenever you plant a food garden, pests will always show up to dine. Though it's part of nature for pests to feed on what's growing, if not treated, these pests can limit your harvest or destroy plants.

There are common pests that are a problem for gardeners. The cabbage looper likes to dine on vegetables like potatoes, cauliflower and tomatoes. It also eats fruits like cantaloupe or watermelon.

You'll know you have this pest in your garden if you see holes in the leaves of your plants. Beetles can also be a problem in a garden and damage plants. You can get cutworms, which will go after seedlings.

This caterpillar insect loves to destroy a plant right where it grows at the base of the plant. Squash bugs can cause trouble in a garden, and so can grasshoppers.

Grasshoppers like to chew on the tender leaves of plants, but they'll also go after the stems.

You can tell if a grasshopper has fed on your plants if you notice holes that are ragged in nature. Spider mites attack food gardens by making a hole in the plant for eating. This causes damage to the plant and can prevent growth or cause the plant to die.

The problem with spider mites is that you can't pick them off your food garden plants, since you can't see them because they're too small. There are plants that you can put into your garden that will help ward off pests.

Any plant that has a foul odor for insects make them hesitant to dine on your garden. Add plants like basil, which drives away insects. As an added bonus, it also keeps flies and mosquitoes away, too.

Rosemary keeps pests away and so does citronella grass. Catnip keeps garden pests away, too. Besides using plants to keep pests away, you may also need to use a pesticide known as insecticides.

Pesticides for gardens can be organic or chemical. Either one will work to keep bugs from bothering your plants. However, keep in mind that some chemical pesticides don't distinguish between warding off helpful insects and harmful ones.

Chemical pesticides can also be dangerous for people and animals. Natural pesticides are gentle on the earth and don't damage the soil. Plus, they're safe for humans and animals.

Diatomaceous earth is a natural insecticide. It's an abrasive one that works to kill pests by drying out the exoskeleton. It's safe for humans and pets, but you must get the one that's labeled as food grade.

Chili pepper spray can also be used to keep pests off your plants. You just spray it on the plants. Avoid contact with your skin or eyes since this can cause a strong reaction in humans.



Tools That Are Essential for Good Gardening

When it comes to food gardening, you need to have the right tools to help make the job easier. Start with a good pair of gloves. You'll want ones that are streamlined and fit right, since gloves that are too big or bulky can interfere with your ability to handle garden tasks.

You want to make sure the cuff is snug against your wrist since you don't want them to allow things like garden debris or dirt to get into the gloves. Look for water resistant material since you can absorb bacteria or allergens from the soil if your gloves aren't waterproof.

When you're finished using the gloves, wash them off with soap and water and hang them up to dry for future use. Next, you need to buy pruning shears. These are used to take off parts of plants that are damaged or dead.

Plus, pruning plants helps them to thrive. When you're done using them, clean off the debris and store them in a container or on hooks in your gardening shed. Be sure to buy a garden fork.

This is used to break up the soil to allow the roots of the plants to get the water and oxygen they need. This is a dual-purpose tool and can be used to get weeds out of the way, too.

Store this tool out of the elements. If the handle of the tool is made of wood, you will need to oil the handle to prevent it from cracking. You'll also need a garden trowel. This tool is necessary for digging holes in the ground for planting.

When you're done using it, wash off the dirt with soap and water, but make sure that you completely dry the tool before storing it. Invest in a good hoe for your food garden. These are used for preparing the soil as well as weeding.

There are different types of hoes. Some have ends like paddles while others have ends that are triangle shaped. After use, rinse off the hoe. You may need to use a wire brush to get the end completely clean.

Once it's clean, you can store it by hanging it from a hook or upright in a container with other long handled garden tools. It's essential that you water the plants in your garden. Most people have a garden that's too large to use a watering can.

Buy a sturdy garden hose with a nozzle that allows you to adjust the flow of water. To store the hose, coil it and hang it on the side of the house. Don't leave a garden hose lying in the sun since the rays and heat can crack the hose and cause it to leak.

Eventually, you'll need to mulch your garden or you may need to bring in soil. It can be too time consuming, inconvenient and heavy to haul this material by hand. Buy a wheelbarrow to use for moving items you need for your garden.

When you're done using it, wipe it clean. If your wheelbarrow has wooden handles, you may need to sand down the handles if they begin to lose their smoothness.



The Easiest Foods to Grow for Beginners

As a beginner, you'll want to start with foods that are easy to grow. These foods are hardy and are known to make it through common mistakes that new gardeners often make.

Green beans can survive in gardens that may not be completely ready for them. All they need is some warm soil that's well watered. So even if your soil doesn't have all the nutrients, this item still manages to flourish.

Tomatoes can be grown by beginners. You just need to stake them, make sure they have plenty of sun and they're ready to grow. If you're a fan of peas and carrots, then as a beginner gardener, you're in luck.

Both of these vegetables are perfect for first timers. Peas aren't vegetables that need constant care or vigilance. Once you plant them, you just need to keep an eye on the water.

They're hardy enough that disease isn't usually a problem and pests can easily be taken care of by washing the plant off. They can also handle cooler weather, so if the temperature drops after you've planted them, they'll still survive.

Carrots just need soil that's cultivated, some room in between plants and they'll grow. Make sure that your soil doesn't have a problem with drainage and you'll be able to harvest plenty of this vegetable.

Beets are another vegetable that you can grow as a beginner. They're hardy and can survive even if conditions aren't perfect for their growth. It might surprise you to know, but lettuce is easy to grow.

It adapts well to various climates and can even survive when it's hot outside. You'll want to make sure it does get sunlight but not if the temperatures are too high. Just like lettuce, spinach is easy for a beginner to grow.

It can grow in sunny or shady areas. You just need to make sure the soil doesn't retain too much water. Other things you can easily grow include radishes, cucumbers, and squash.

Because these are easy to grow foods that will survive even if the care isn't perfect, you'll be motivated to learn from any mistakes that you make while growing them. You can learn from the steps you took to grow these.

Make notes of what you did while growing these beginner foods. Keep a record of when you planted and where. Note what you did when it came to the soil and what kinds of weather conditions were in play.

Keep track of how much or how little water you gave the plants. Write down what issues you had with pests, if any. This way, you'll know what to do the next time you plant your garden.

Not all Vegetables Get Along

Peas don't like too much water.

Potatoes do not like tomatoes or cucumbers.

Potatoes and cabbage, onion, and beets get along well.

Beans do not get along with cucumbers, beets or onions, but they do get along great with carrots.

Tomatoes love carrots and peas.

Cabbage does not like radishes.

Carrots and onions get along well.

Grow the Food Your Family Loves to Eat

A garden is a labor of love. It's fun to grow things, but it does take some effort. You certainly don't want to waste that effort by trying to grow things that no one is going to eat.

It can be wasteful as well as expensive to grow foods that will rot or get tossed out. Instead of planting foods that you think are fit for a garden, look at what you already consume.

Your family has favorite foods that they enjoy. You can grow these foods for them. The items that you grow in your garden can help your family be healthy all year long. You can keep fresh fruit and vegetables around even in the winter time.

Plus, you can also can any surplus that you don't use. These foods are loaded with vitamins and minerals. Plus, many garden grown foods are rich in antioxidants as well. When you're planning out your garden, choose foods that are your family's favorites.

Get everyone involved by asking them what they'd like to have from the garden. Then you can design your plan for the area. You'll be able to grow certain plants together in the same space.

Anything that your family puts on the list can be grown. Some of the food items may be a little more difficult to grow because they may take more care or have more steps involved than you're knowledgeable about.

But you can easily learn the steps that you need to take for any food. Many families enjoy green beans. You can use these in casseroles, in salads or soups or as a side dish.

Green beans grown in the garden can come in a variety too, so you don't have to stick with one choice. Potatoes are a favorite in many families. These can be used to make oven baked French fries, baked potatoes, mashed potatoes, scalloped potatoes and more.

Tomatoes are easy to grow for beginners and you can grow the Roma variety or cherry tomatoes. You can also grow beefsteak tomatoes. These are perfect for sandwiches, salads, stews, for use in sauces and more.

If fruit is something that your family loves to eat, you can grow a wide selection of these foods. Watermelon is a sturdy fruit to grow in a garden and is often a family favorite. You can also grow other melons.

It's easy to grow berries in a food garden. You can choose from ones like blueberries, strawberries, raspberries or blackberries. Some fruits may take a little more care, but

can still be grown by a beginner gardener. You can grow apples, peaches, cherries and more.

Foods You Can Grow That Deliver Big Yields

Some of the foods that you grow in the garden will give you a small yield because they just don't produce as big of a crop as other plants do. However, some plants can give you a big yield.

One of these is tomatoes. The reason that tomatoes give such a big yield is due to the way that they naturally grow. Rather than growing single stalks, tomatoes grow in groups.

So you can have one tomato plant give you a yield that's two or three times more than what you were expecting. Tomatoes will vary in their gardening needs by what type of variety you choose.

Some of the plants are going to give you a greater abundance but will end up being smaller in size. For example, if you choose to grow cherry tomatoes, you'll get a lot more of these than you would if you planted slicing tomatoes.

Beefsteak tomatoes are the big variety, but if you plant these, your crop won't yield as much as smaller tomatoes do. Cucumbers are another high yield plant. These are naturally hardy plants and grow a lot of fruit.

The amount of yield you'll get will depend on the number of vines you have. You can usually get a little over two pounds of cucumbers for each vine that you have growing. Peas grow up so they don't take up a lot of garden space.

But for the small amount of space they take up, they give back plenty. Depending on the size of the row you plant, you can end up with five pounds or more. Potatoes, even in different varieties, grow well and abundantly in a garden.

You can end up harvesting all the potatoes that your family needs for a season if you plant them correctly. Leave at least 12 inches between your plants and you can end up with between 25 to 30 pounds of potatoes.

This includes planting sweet potatoes as well. If you're looking for something to plant that's hardy and can survive nearly any mistake, then squash or zucchini is ideal for that.

These plants don't need a lot of care or supervision to thrive. And when they're done growing, they deliver a high yield. These can be grown vertically, too. If you like okra, then you're in luck.

This plant is a fast producing plant that thrives when it's hot outside. One row of okra plants can deliver 10 pounds or more of the this delicious food. The only drawback is because it is such a fast producing food, you may have to spend additional time harvesting more often.

You can grow fruit that gives a high yield as well. An apple tree will give you close to 150+ pounds of apples each year. If you want to plant a peach tree instead, you can expect about 100 pounds of the fruit.

Planting blackberries will give you 10-15 pounds of the fruit per bush. And plum trees in a good garden can yield over 150-300 pounds of the fruit every year. You may grow way more than your family can consume, so you can donate it or share it with friends and family.



Don't Forget to Grow Some Herbs to Flavor Your New Foods!

It's fun and exciting to grow your own foods in a garden. But you're going to want a way to flavor these foods. Don't waste your time searching the grocery store for herbs. You'll end up paying a lot more than you need to.

Plus, there's no way to tell if those herbs weren't treated with some kind of insecticide. You don't want that. You want the healthiest, least expensive option to use when it comes to flavoring your food.

Herbs need well prepared soil and having the correct drainage is important. You'll also need to make sure you provide plenty of sunlight, so don't plant in the shady spots of your garden when planting herbs.

Plant sage to use for your cooking. You'll need to plant this in a sunny area. When you're ready to use it in your meals, you just take some of the leaves and the plant continues to grow.

When it comes to food preparation and flavoring dishes, one of the must haves with cooking is basil. This herb is commonly used because of its great flavor. It can be added to cold or warm foods, including beverages.

To season soup or cold salads, you can use rosemary from your garden. This is an evergreen plant, which means you'll have access to this herb all year long for your cooking needs.

Parsley is a herb that's easy to grow and often used in cooking. You can plant this herb in an indoor or an outdoor garden. If you like making sauces or you're a fan of chicken salad, you're going to want to grow chives.

This herb is used to flavor as well as garnish foods. There's one herb that can be used in many different dishes, but it's most often used in foods that have a tomato base. This is oregano.

You can use this herb in things like pizza, spaghetti sauce, and as a flavoring if you're someone who likes to make your own sauces or marinades for meat. If you do choose to plant oregano, it needs to have plenty of sunlight.

One herb that can season a lot of different foods is dill. You can use it to make homemade dips for crackers. It can be used to flavor seafood or soups. It can also be used in main dishes.

The only thing you have to be careful about when growing this herb is where you plant it. It can't tolerate being planted near certain other plants. While it's a hardy plant, you do need to be extra careful with the root system.

Some herbs spread. I planted dill one year, and it took over! Now I only plant herbs in containers.

From food dishes to beverages, mint is an herb that's often used. It can be used in yogurt, tea, smoothies and more. Mint is a hardy growing herb, so it's recommended for beginner gardeners.

Things You Can Do with Your Harvest

Planting the garden and caring for the plants can be hard work. But all your effort in making sure the garden thrives will pay off in the end. After the hard work is over, there comes the harvest.

There are a lot of benefits you'll be able to have once the growing is done. When the plants are ready, you get to go out into the garden and choose whatever you want to have.

You can cook this food as soon as it's ready. You'll be able to prepare a soup with the freshest ingredients. Or, you can have fresh fruits and vegetables whenever you want them.

No more having to run out to the store. No more trying to figure out how to keep store bought produce from going bad too quickly. When you want a fresh tomato to slice for sandwiches, you can go out to your garden and get one.

If you decide you want a salad, you can shop in your garden and put one together. But besides being able to prepare meals with the foods you grew, there are other benefits as well. I love having my lettuce and tomatoes right outside the door. Yum!

You can get your kids involved in the gardening process. This does a lot for them. Children love to be able to grow things. You can teach them how to grow the foods they want to eat from seeds or plants.

It can be a teaching experience, not only on how to grow their own foods, but also how to save money. You can use growing a garden to teach them the importance of eating healthy.

Teaching children about growing a garden gives them plenty of life skills, too. It teaches them about physical activity and can improve motor skills. If you decide to can the vegetables and fruits you grow, it teaches children about setting aside for food needs and building a supply.

Children don't necessarily enjoy trying any new food. Just like adults, they have their favorites. But like adults, it's easy to get into a rut and stick to eating only the same kinds of foods repeatedly.

This can cause them to miss out on some good food, but also teaches them to limit their palate and you don't want that. A variety of foods can give kids better nutrition and teach them about the importance of knowing nutritional skills.

When you let kids get involved in gardening, they see the foods they chose or that they took care of go from seed to harvest. This is a great way to get them to try new foods.

When you grow a food garden, you can provide for your family and help your children understand the value of self-reliance.

But growing a garden can also benefit your community. There are plenty of food pantries that lack fresh fruits and vegetables. These are things that everyone needs in order to be healthy.

There will always be a surplus when you grow a garden. You can take this surplus that you don't use for canning and donate it to food pantries for others to enjoy. Some senior centers will take the donations, too.

Protecting Your Garden

You'll want to know how to protect and prepare your garden for the seasons, but also for extreme weather conditions. In the summer, one of the things you have to be leery of with a garden is the heat.

If you end up having a heat wave hit your area, this can destroy some of your plants. You need to make sure to protect the roots of the plant. By putting down a protective covering, you can make sure the plant survives.

It's the heat that affects the roots of the plants. You want to deflect as much heat as you can from the plant. When you apply mulch, it helps keep too much heat from hitting the roots.

Because the sun can easily wither plants during summer heat, make sure that you cover the plants if you need to. There are garden shade cloths that you can buy to cover them.

Be sure to give the plants water, but don't overwater them. For best results, be sure to water them when it's early. If you know that a seasonal condition is going to do something such as bring in high winds, you'll want to prepare the garden.

Plants that are close to the ground don't usually have as much of a problem when it's too windy. However, plants that stand above the ground, especially when they're taller, can easily be destroyed by wind.

You either need to cover them or tie them to stakes until the wind is over. Summer can bring storms - including hailstorms. When hail beats down on plants, it can break or kill them.

Cover small plants with buckets and put something on the bucket to keep it from being blown off or tipped. Like summer, winter can bring conditions that aren't ideal for plant survival.

Be sure that before winter hits, you check the garden and remove anything that's dead or any vegetable or fruit that might have rotted. You'll also want to add mulch to the plants.

The reason for this is because it helps plants better survive cold temperatures. When it gets cold outside, you need to be on the watch for frost because this damages plants. Place netting over the plant to protect it from frost damage.

You'll want to keep plants safe by covering them with material if needed. You can use fabric designed to be used in gardening to lay over the plants. But you have to be sure that whatever material you use doesn't actually come in direct contact with the plant.

Because if this material traps water, it could lead to causing the plants to freeze. There are many steps between opening your seed packs to harvesting the bounty where your task will be to nurture and protect the plant along the way.

But in the end, learning how to grow your own food garden will be a true benefit to you and your loved ones and will provide the best tasting, most nutritionally sound produce you could imagine.



What About Flowers?

The planning and preparation are pretty much the same when you are planting flowers trees and such.

One thing to think about when choosing flowers is the bloom time. You don't want to just plant tulips and daffodils. You will have an explosion of color for a couple weeks, and then...nothing.

You can plant so that there will always be something going on.

Crocus comes up first. Then hyacinth, then daffodils, then pastel tulips, then brighter color tulips, then lilacs and crab apple, then Asiatic lilies, then roses start. Oriental lilies bloom summer and fall...

So you see, this can get quite involved.

Sites like Gurneys.com give you a lot of information about the needs of each plant. I have ordered tons of stuff from them over the years.

The good news is, once you have perennials planted, its just a matter of maintaining.

Annuals that have to be planted every year are good for borders and containers.

Don't be afraid to experiment and move things around. Gardening becomes sort of an ongoing hobby. Don't put too much pressure on yourself.

Start simply and build your skills over the years. I started small.

My first venture was tomatoes. I planted 12 plants. What did I know? We had tomatoes coming out of our ears! I was out in the first snow gathering whatever I could save.

I never planted that many tomato plants again!

You learn as you go. Just enjoy the ride! The reason they call it a hobby is that its something you can play with for the rest of your life.