



Get Growing!

Starting your own vegetable or herb garden is a great motivator for adding more produce to your diet. When you have fresh, delicious ingredients readily available at home, you won't be able to resist throwing some into tonight's dinner!

Not only does home-grown produce that is picked at its prime have maximal nutritional value and flavor, but you can also avoid potentially harmful pesticides that are used on commercial crops. Additionally, gardening is a great way to get outdoors and get active! Though starting and maintaining a garden may seem intimidating for beginners, there are loads of great online resources for any questions you may have. Here are just a few beginner tips to get you growing!

10 Gardening Tips for Beginners

1. START SMALL

If this is your first attempt at growing a vegetable garden, starting small makes the process more manageable. By using space wisely, you may be able to grow what you want with just a few containers or a small raised bed. Raised beds and containers also tend to require less overall maintenance. As your interest and experience grows over the years, you can always expand your growing space!

2. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF GARDENING RESOURCES

Throughout the planning, planting, and growing process, you can learn much more by asking questions! University agricultural extension websites are a great option. For Indiana gardeners, the Purdue Extension website covers a myriad of gardening topics, and even has extension agents in nearly every county that can personally answer your questions. Seed websites such as Burpee.com also have very helpful planting and seed starting calendars, tools for planning your garden, planting and care instructions, and more.

3. LOCATION IS KEY

Your first consideration should be to find where plants would get full sun exposure 6-8 hours a day. Ideally, the spot should also be close to a water source, to make watering quick and easy! Finally, if planting in the ground, avoid nearby trees and shrubs and choose a more elevated area that will drain well.

4. TRY GROWING FROM SEED

From one seed packet, which generally costs around \$3, you can grow many plants, so this is a much cheaper option requiring minimal extra work. However, some tropical plants such as tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant cannot be planted outside until late Spring (if you live in a cooler climate), providing them with insufficient time to grow. Therefore, you will need to either start the seeds indoors in Spring (following seed packet instructions) or purchase seedlings and transplant them to your garden when temperatures are warm enough.

CONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS

CONTAINER GARDENS are the most convenient way to begin growing. All you need are containers and potting soil to begin planting! Many types of containers can be used, though bigger tends to be better. Generally, containers should be at least 12 inches in depth, and at least 12 inches in diameter at the top to support productive vegetables. They also need several holes at the bottom for good drainage. Planting in containers eliminates the need for weeding, though they do require more frequent watering.



RAISED BEDS enable you to grow more with less space since crops can be grown closer together. They also allow you to control soil conditions, which is ideal if you have unproductive soil or poor drainage. The frames should be no more than 4 feet wide so that you can work the bed without ever having to step in it. Pre-made frames can be purchased or frames can be made inexpensively using rot-resistant lumber or cinder blocks. Ideally, frames should be placed on even, cleared land (though some place on existing lawn). Once placed, line the bottom with a few layers of newspaper and then fill in with 2 parts top soil and two parts organic matter (ideally 1 part compost or manure and 1 part peat moss).

IN-GROUND GARDENS can be prepared as smaller beds (no more than 4 feet wide) or planted in rows in a large plot. Traditional row planting requires considerably more space, since there must be at least 18 inches between rows to allow space for walking. Beds make better use of space since crops can be planted closely together. With in-ground gardens, you will need to till and make additions (such as plenty of organic matter) to existing soil. Test soil each year; it may take a few seasons to get the soil to optimal conditions.



5. PLAN BEFORE YOU PLANT

When choosing what to plant, consider what you will actually want to eat, what you will have space for, and when to plant. Seed catalogs (often available at garden stores or for free online) show you the details of all sorts of varieties. Once you decide on the types of vegetables to grow, choose 2 or 3 varieties, so if one is less successful, you will have another to make up for it. You can grow the most fruitful variety and choose another to try next year.

To make full use of your space, keep in mind that some types of vegetables can be grown close together. For example, consider planting longer season crops such as peppers or tomatoes beside faster growing crops such as lettuces. Some vegetables are competitors while other plants make good companions. Basil, for example, improves tomatoes' flavor, and inhibits pests. Do a little research and try to group companion plants together. Additionally, if space is limited, remember to grow upward- tomatoes, cucumbers, peas, and beans all grow better and use less space with the support of trellises, fences or wire cages. Always label what you plant!

6. WATER WELL

How much you water and with what frequency will depend on your climate, but most plants in the ground require about an inch of water per week. Containers and raised beds will require more watering (sometimes even daily). If you put your finger down about an inch in the soil, and find it is dry, it's time to water! Ideally, you should water deeply and close to the roots to avoid wetting the plant leaves (which can lead to disease). If you can't avoid wetting leaves, water early in the morning so the plants will dry quickly.



7. KEEP PESTS AT BAY

With a small garden, pest control is possible without chemical pesticides. Keep an eye out for leaf-munching insects and diseased leaves and pull them off by hand. If you notice a larger infestation, whip up a batch of natural insecticide by mixing 1 cup vegetable oil with 1 Tbsp. liquid dish soap. Add 1 Tbsp. of this solution to 2 cups warm water and thoroughly spray affected plants. Planting herbs helps repel pests, and nasturtiums, poppies, and marigolds also attract “good” insects that eat the “bad” ones. The most important thing you can do to prevent disease is to keep plants healthy and keep the garden area clean, so be sure to harvest vegetables on time and remove dead and diseased plants. Finally, keep an eye out for weeds and pull them early; never let them go to seed!



8. KEEP PRODUCE COMING

Succession planting allows you to have produce throughout the season, rather than having a concentrated harvest, so try to plant a row or a new container every 1 to 2 weeks. For example, you can have a continual supply of salad greens available for cutting if you sow a handful of seeds each week! Additionally, you can start the growing season with planting cool-weather crops for Spring, follow up with your warm weather crops to be harvested in late Summer, and finish with planting more cool-weather crops for the Fall. This is most effective if you have seedlings ready to transplant right after you harvest or if you plant seeds that are faster growing (to identify cold and warm weather crops and plant on the ideal date for your region, go to www.burpee.com/growingcalendar).

9. HARVESTING TIME

Daily garden visits will enable you to pick produce when it is at its peak. This also prevents fruit from over-ripening on the plant and attracting insects and animals. If you harvest when vegetables are just ripe, it will encourage the plant to keep producing. Always be sure to wash produce well, especially root vegetables and ground crops such as greens.

10. KEEP A RECORD

Keeping a little garden journal is immensely beneficial if you want to continue improving your garden each year. Map out where you planted different vegetables, and rotate their locations the next year. To prevent disease and have better yields, you should only plant the same vegetable in the same spot every 3 years. You should also record which varieties were most successful or if any had major problems with pests or disease. Just a little time and effort will make your planning for next year much simpler!