

Gardening - Level 1

Growing vegetables is actually pretty simple and requires 5 basic needs, **Soil, water, sun, care, and time.**

Whether you're thinking of putting a few containers on your patio, building a raised 4×4 garden box, or tearing up half of your yard, here are a few tips to get you going:

1. Prepare your Soil

If this is your first year gardening, you have a few options available to you. You can purchase and add top soil, compost, peat moss and other amendments straight into your new containers or garden beds. This can be an easy solution, and will leave you with light and workable soil. The main downside of this approach is the cost.

The other (cheaper) option is to dig straight into the ground. To go this route, you will want to:

- **Till your soil.** Either by hand for a smaller garden, or rent a roto-tiller from your local hardware store for a larger location.
- **Analyze your soil.** Most garden centers sell affordable kits to help you determine which nutrients your soil has in abundance, and which ones are lacking. This will help you decide how to fertilize.
- **Build it up.** Each year you should do 1 or 2 things to improve the soil. It might be adding peat moss to lighten the heavy, clay-ish soil in some parts of the country. Compost or composted manure are always good bets for increasing soil nutrients as well as creating a more workable soil that will hold moisture well. Some high quality, organic/ecological topsoil is another option.

2. Watering Matters

There is one lesson in regards to watering a garden, it is this: **Less is more.**

Over-watering leads to plants with shallow, immature root systems, incapable of reaching down deeply to find water of their own. It also creates more work for you, as your plants will come to depend on regular watering.

When plants are required to extend long roots to obtain their water, rather than getting it the easy way (aka the hose), they will be stronger plants in general, and you will have less work to do keeping up with their H2O needs.

So when should you water and how much?

1. **When you have newly planted seeds.** Germination requires steady moisture, so light but consistent watering is key during this time. Keep the soil moist, but not soaking.
2. **Once or (maybe) twice a week.** This is my regular watering schedule, though sometimes I water even less. When doing a regular watering, take the time to give each plant a really good, long drink. Ideally, you should water long enough for 6 inches of soil to be saturated.
3. **During dry and hot spells.** If your plants are really wilting in the heat of some particularly hot afternoon sun, pamper them a little more than usual. Same with periods of drought.

Be sure to keep your watering only to mornings and evenings. Watering that is done in the afternoon will quickly evaporate before the plants have a chance to get what they need. **Try to water before 10am and after 4 or 5pm, or even later.**

3. Let the Sunshine In

The ideal garden location will offer your plants a good 6-8 hours of direct sunlight. When selecting a spot for your new garden, this is one of the most important factors to keep in mind.

However, some plants are more shade-tolerant and others are more sun-loving.

Partial Sun (4-6 hours a day): Lettuces, Swiss Chard, Kale, Spinach, Collards, Root Vegetables (carrots, radishes, turnips, beets, etc.), Peas, Parsley, Cauliflower

Full Sun (6+ hours a day): Beans, Cabbage, Broccoli, Cucumbers, Squash (winter and summer), Corn, Eggplant, Melons (all kinds), Tomatoes, Peppers

Consider the sunlight available to your garden as you choose not only which crops you will grow, but how much of them you will be able to grow and where they will be planted. Even gardeners without a full sun location can grow a very respectable and varied amount of food!

4. Care for Your Garden

Yes, this is the part where you are told that you need to weed your garden. You knew it was coming, right?

The happy thing is that it doesn't need to be an all-consuming or back-breaking task.

The keys to keeping the weeding work minimal?

- **Plant thickly.** With crops like beans, radishes, peas, carrots and more, you can scatter your seed very thickly. When the plants come up, they will create a natural canopy to help shade out any weeds that are feeling ambitious.
- **Mulch!** By adding a layer of organic material like dead grass or leaves, hay, or even newspaper and cardboard, you cut down on the weeds ability to get much traction.
- **Weed little, but often.** Keeping up with weeds when they're small and easy to pull is key. Just a few minutes each day, or a 15 min. block several times a week will help to keep the invaders at bay.

We can't forget fertilizing in a discussion of caring for a garden. **Best bets are homemade compost, or composted manure from a trusted source (like a local, ecological farmer).**

If those options aren't available to you, there are some excellent brands of organic and ecological fertilizers out there, completely without nasty chemicals.

When to fertilize? Some key times are building up the soil before planting, and during important stages of development, like once your plants are a few inches tall before they really take off, or when they first start to set out flowers or fruits.

5. It All Takes Time

Proper timing makes all the difference when it comes to planting your garden.

Learn how long each plant needs to grow to maturity, what time of year it should be planted (early spring or summer, or even fall), and when to begin your seedlings. **Knowing these details will make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful garden.**

Make it easier by creating a garden binder or notebook, where you record these kinds of details.

To learn the needs of each crop you're thinking of growing, here are a few resources that I find helpful:

- [The Old Farmer's Almanac](#)- You can enter your own location, to find precise dates for your gardening zone
- [All New Square Foot Gardening](#)- An old standard for beginners, this has excellent charts to help you determine when and what to plant
- [You Grow Girl](#)- A great, printable chart to plot your seed starting and planting dates into.

Now Go Grow Something!

If you've been putting off gardening because you're unsure of how to go about it, or worried about the time commitment, I would encourage you to just jump in and give it a go.

Final advice for beginners?

- Start small.
- Grow what you love.
- Keep it simple and have fun.
- Don't let it stress you out.
- Enjoy the fruits of your labors!

Happy Gardening!