

backyard bounty

Keep your food fresh and pesticide-free with a family vegetable garden. *by Laura Kenyon*



The idea of harvesting your own food sounds great—but unless you're Mother Nature, it doesn't always come instinctively. If you want to fill your table with straight-from-the-farm dishes (without venturing any further than your backyard), here are some tips for starting your own vegetable garden and watching it thrive.

GETTING STARTED

As with anything new, the best advice for starting a garden is to think small: Consider planting in containers. Or, keep beds to a manageable size, like three-by-six feet, says Jennifer Kujawski, co-author of *Week-by-Week Vegetable Gardener's Handbook*. Then look for a spot that gets at least six hours of direct sunlight each day, is sheltered from strong winds, and has good drainage. Also, it should come as no surprise that nutrient-rich soil promotes nutrient-rich plants. Thankfully, test kits cost just a couple dollars at most home and garden stores, require only a tiny sample of dirt, and can immediately tell you how rich your soil is—as well as its pH level. Most vegetables thrive in slightly acidic to neutral soil (pH 6-7), so if your reading comes in below that, just work some lime into the ground; if it's higher, add sulfur.

CHOOSING YOUR VEGGIES

So, what should you plant? According to Niki Jabbour, author of *Groundbreaking Food Gardens*, crops like leaf lettuce, beans, carrots, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, zucchini, peas, potatoes, and herbs are all easy, fun, and delicious. "Children will love planting the large seeds of beans and zucchini, as well as the potato tubers," she says, giving a special shout-out to "lemon" cucumbers, sungold tomatoes ("garden candy!"), rainbow carrots, and pattypan zucchini.

MAINTAINING YOUR GARDEN

Much like us, plants need water and food to grow. For veggie gardens, that's roughly one inch of water per week, says Jabbour. "And if Mother Nature hasn't provided it, you will need to get out the watering can," she advises. Adding a few inches of mulch can help—it will cut back on how much water you use, while also keeping soil moist for the next dry spell.

No matter how diligent you are, if you're taking the organic route, you're bound to hit a pest control snag at some point. Why? Because chemical-free deterrents are still evolving, and humans aren't the only ones who like juicy, plump tomatoes. While organic soaps are available, Jabbour says the best weapon against insects may be either hand-removal or a quick spray with the hose. For larger critters like chipmunks and rabbits, Kujawski admits that you might just have to share. "Organic gardening involves keeping weeds and pests at a manageable level," she says, "not exerting total control over Mother Nature."

HARVESTING

When it's time to harvest, remember to pick veggies at their nutritional peak. This could mean anywhere from 50 to 70 days for carrots, cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes, and as long as 80 for peas. It's smart to check back often, have patience, and, if you're unsure, to reference the ripeness guide at *almanac.com*. Plus, to maximize production, Jabbour advises picking the outer leaves of leafy crops first (giving the interior additional time to grow) and trying your hand at succession planting. To do this, plant additional organic seeds (a good option is Seeds of Change, *seedsofchange.com*) once the faster-growing crops have been harvested. Doing so will encourage your vegetable garden to produce for as long as possible—and ensure your table stays full the entire season! ●

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