

The Basics

Gardening can be fun, easy, and good for you and your family. Here are some basic ideas to help you on your way.

Food-growing gardens have a few basic needs to be successful:

Sun: Most vegetables and fruits need at least 6-8 hours of full sun. If you don't have a full-sun site, leafy greens and some herbs can get by with 4-6 hours of sun.

Water: You will need to find a way to get water to your garden. At a minimum, you will need a hose and a sprinkler or a watering can. A drip irrigation system is well worth the initial time and cost, as it will more than pay you back in time and water saved. (See the iGROW Water Wise document.)

Soil: Whether you plant in the ground or in a container, you will need good soil. The soil needs to drain (not compact) and have enough nutrients. All soil will need to be amended (mixed) with compost and a basic fertilizer mix on a regular basis to keep it healthy.

Access: Your garden needs to be accessible not just for ease of bringing in materials, but for its use. The closer and more convenient the garden, the more likely you will care for and harvest from it.

Planting Options

There are many different options for your garden depending on your home, your yard, and your needs. Start small to keep it manageable and enjoyable.



Containers: Many different types of containers can serve for growing food crops: terra cotta pots, 5-15 gallon plastic containers, half wine barrels and planter boxes all work. Remember that it needs to be big enough to allow your plant to grow to full size. The soil that you put into the containers needs to have good drainage. Store-bought potting soil mixed with compost works well. Soil from the ground tends to compact too much in a container. Plants in containers need more water and fertilizer than those in the ground. They dry out fast. Almost all annual vegetables can be grown in a container, as long as the container is large enough. However, some do better than others. (See the iGROW planting chart for recommendations.)

Raised Beds: When you make raised beds (a box on top of the ground with a wire mesh bottom), you get the best of both containers and a yard garden. You can improve the soil that you put in the bed and the plants' roots can spread out. Raised beds can be built with several types of materials as long as they are rot resistant and non-toxic: redwood, cedar, concrete blocks, and recycled plastic are all options. Make sure that the bed's size allows you access to the middle; 3 feet wide is good. Attach hardware cloth in the bottom to protect the plants from gophers. Raised beds warm up earlier in the season and drain well, but can dry out sooner than the local soil. If possible, loosen and scrape up some soil from the site and mix with compost or buy a soil mix to fill them. (Any invasive plants such as Bermuda grass must be dug out completely before installing beds.) A drip system is easy to put into a raised bed. You can build raised beds right on loosened soil or grass mowed very low. Raised beds can be more work and cost in the beginning, but pay off in ease of maintenance.

Yard Gardens: If your yard is in the sun, and you don't have many gophers, then the simplest thing is to build your garden right there. You can build beds or grow in single rows. Amend your soil with compost and a basic organic fertilizer mix. (See the iGROW document on transforming your lawn.)

Edible Landscaping: Remember vegetables and fruit can be used as borders and in landscaped areas. Be aware of root competition from larger plants and increased slug and snail activity. Perennial vegetables are good choices; see the following. It is best to use larger plant starts than seeds or small seedlings.

What to Grow

Annual Vegetables: Questions you need to answer are: Is it a warm or cool season plant? Do you plant from seed or transplant? How big will plants get and do they need support? (See the iGROW planting guides for more detailed information.)

Perennial Herbs: Oregano, thyme, sage, rosemary, chives, etc. are the easiest edibles to put into your landscape. Most of them love our climate, and they add beauty and create habitat for beneficial insects.

Perennial Vegetables: Artichokes, asparagus, rhubarb, and tree collards are all vegetables that can give you food year after year. They are a nice addition to any garden and work well in the landscape.

Fruit Trees and Berries: Most gardens can accommodate some fruit also. Strawberries are easy to introduce, as are raspberries and other cane fruits (especially if you have a long narrow space in the sun). Dwarf fruit trees are small enough to fit in many yards and start producing in a few years.

Final Thought

Remember to enjoy your garden. Though there may be disappointments, learn from them and try again. Ask your neighbors for help and advice. Think about getting a group of neighbors together to help each other with the big projects. Eat the fruits of your labor.