



**A beginners guide to planning,
planting, and harvesting a fruitful
backyard garden.**

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[Hounds in the Kitchen](#)

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Grow Your Garden

Edible gardening is an art and science that my family loves. It doesn't take much time, but at some moments gardening is a dirty, back breaking hobby. So why do we share the love of growing things?

Gardening connects us to nature. Growing flowers, fruits, and vegetables allows us to appreciate beautiful bees, the miracle of a seed sprouting, and life giving rain. Gardening beautifies the surroundings of our home, deck, and porch. Having something to tend gives our family the perfect excuse to spend a few minutes outside each day putting, weeding, and observing our place on the earth.

Gardening offers physical rewards too. Home grown tomatoes are tastier than anything money can buy. We harvest a wide range of edibles including beans, peas, greens, berries, root vegetables and herbs. Flower blossoms attract birds and butterflies and can be cut for beautiful bouquets.

Producing vegetables, fruits, and flowers in the backyard saves money over buying high quality seasonal produce at the grocery. We enjoy preserving the summer harvest for other seasons by canning vegetables, drying herbs, and pressing flowers. Further, we can grow plants not available at traditional markets, such as heirloom varieties.

In sum, we garden to beautify our world, enjoy tasty edibles, and conserve resources. We humbly carry on the long standing tradition of humans working the earth.

Tasks: Take a moment to write down your inspiration. It might even be fun to post your ideas somewhere in your house to keep you motivated in the dog days of summer.

Grow What You Want To Eat

The first principle of garden planning is to grow what you want to eat. This sounds simple, but sometimes people plant what is available or what their mother planted whether or not it is something they actually want to consume. Just last year, we planted a big row of radishes. After harvesting just a few, we determined we don't enjoy the taste and gave away the rest.

Next, consider what will grow well in the conditions and space you have. Below are some suggestions:

Plants ideal for containers:

- lettuces
- greens
- herbs
- tomatoes and peppers (BIG containers)

Plants well suited to small spaces:

- kale
- chard
- radishes
- garlic
- beets
- herbs
- lettuce

Plants that can be trellised vertically:

- peas
- beans
- cucumbers
- squashes
- melons

Excellent producers in Ohio conditions:

- tomatoes
- cucumbers
- beans
- summer squash
- zucchini
- kale
- chard
- peppers
- raspberries

Next it's time to purchase seeds! I recommend looking through an online or print seed catalog like to determine which varieties you are available. I have been very happy with the seed quality and customer service of the [Seeds of Change](#) online store. Heirloom varieties typically grow very well in the home garden. Many gardeners prefer non hybrid seeds so that they may save seeds for the following year.



If you have the chance, ask a gardening friend or neighbor if they have any seeds to share. Most of us gardeners have a collection of seed packets we are more than happy to share. I have yet to use old seeds that don't germinate, but I do recommend planting a few extras if you are using dated seeds.

If this is your first year gardening or you have a very small space, consider purchasing seedlings instead of starting seeds indoors. Seed starting is not hard, but it does require significant time and money investment. You will probably want to focus those resources on building beds.

Many seeds will be directly sown in the ground, such as peas,

beans, lettuces, greens, onion sets, potatoes, squashes, and sunflowers. These are perhaps the easiest to grow because you just dip seeds in the soil and watch them produce.

Tasks: Make a list of what you want to grow. Browse seed catalogs and chat with friends to determine the varieties you want. Order or collect your seeds.

Planning Garden Location

Location is the next consideration for gardeners. The ideal location will have 6 - 8 hours of sunlight a day, access to rain barrel or hose water, and convenience to the kitchen. In less than ideal locations or apartment dwellings, look for sunny spots where you can locate movable containers.

To choose a location, observe the sunlight over a few days. Generally, yards on south facing sides of structures will get more summer light in Ohio. Be sure to consider side yards and front yards as planting locations.

Trees not only reduce sunlight but dense roots make planting difficult. Further, walnut trees release a tanin through their roots that kills nightshade family plants including tomatoes and green pepper. Choose a location as far from trees as possible.

When picking the place for your edible garden, choose the size of your beds at the same time. Ideally, beds will be no more than 4 feet wide to allow for easy access when weeding and harvesting.

How much space do you need? It varies. I'm willing to bet that once you start gardening you will always want more beds. For your first garden, 20 - 30 square feet will go a long way.

I like to visually draw my garden. [Plan Garden](#) has a planner that makes and stores your plans online. It costs \$25/year. An alternative is to download [Garden Planner](#), which is free for 15 days and \$20 to purchase. Pen and graph paper are also great!

Tasks: Observe sunlight and choose the location for your garden. Draw your bed(s) and begin to envision your new landscape.

How and When to Sow Seeds

There are oodles of books about starting seeds from people far more qualified than me to be dispensing advice. If you really want to know everything, I suggest searching out references at your local library.

What we do here is a casual process guided mostly by the backs of the seed packets and our own yearning to be outside.

Indoors we start some peppers, tomatoes, and herbs. Our setup is a simple plastic tray with peat pots and a hardware store fluorescent light suspended on top.

As soon as we can work the soil, around the end of March, we will sow potatoes outdoors. Peas, shallots and greens are sown next in early april. Greens can be started indoors but with our limited seed starting space we just start them outside.

Everything else will be direct sown around May 1. The traditional frost free date is May 15, but I am usually willing to take the risk by May 1. I cover beds with old sheets for the night if there is a late frost.

If you are planting seedlings, do so between May 1 and May 15 in central Ohio. Check the [National Arboretum zone map](#) for frost free dates in other locations.



Direct sowing is a great garden project for children. Our daughter Lillian is good at punching her finger down to make holes and covering the seeds back up. We label rows with old plastic silverware, popsicle sticks, or whatever else is available.

We sow many seeds two or three weeks in a row to extend their production. Peas, squash, beans, carrots and greens are all good candidates for this. In the fall after early season vegetables (peas, broccoli, greens) have gone by, we will sow late season vegetables like carrots, beets, chard, kale, and lettuces in their rows.

To keep everything in order, I generally arrange seed packets in a box based on their planting date. I put them at the back of the line after they are planted.

Tasks: Determine which seeds you will start indoors and which you will sow outside directly. Make a planting calendar or list. You may want to use this online [planting calendar calculator](#). Follow your calendar when the dates arise.

Garden Bed Styles

The most basic technique for creating a garden bed is double digging. As the name implies, double dug beds are carefully turned with a garden shovel once over the whole surface. Some peat moss and/or compost can be sprinkled on top and then the whole bed is dug again. Each round of shoveling should be at least four inches deep.



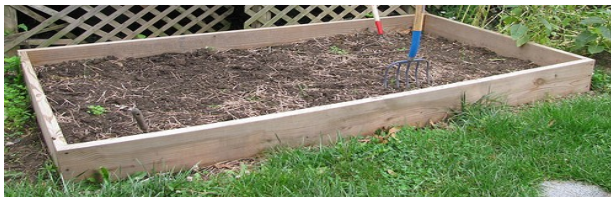
Our strawberries, garlic, herbs and kale are all relegated to double dug beds. It takes me approximately 1 hour to double dig a 4 foot square bed. My body is achy for a few days after because double digging is hard work!! We line the beds with rocks or bricks if we have them to provide a visual reminder to little feet that plants are growing there.

A tiller will do the same job as a double digging in far less time with less effort. Most of us backyard gardeners do not have a gas powered tiller easy accessible, but they can be rented. We have never chosen a tiller to avoid the rental fee or the hassle of transporting it.

The next common bed style is the raised bed. Here, sides are built from lumber and dirt is filled in the top. The Pioneer Woman has a great [tutorial for building your own raised bed](#). We follow a similar procedure except we use 2×8 or 2×10s instead of using two layers of 2×4s for the sides.

Sides may be built from treated or untreated lumber, recycled plastic lumber, or cement blocks. Cedar is a naturally occurring wood that resists rot. Plastic lumber will last for a very long

time, though it is heavy and costly to transport initially. Cement blocks are a popular choice at community gardens because they can be easily reconfigured or moved.



Some publications will tell you to avoid treated lumber at all costs. I was skeptical so I asked Alex, a

material scientist by education and profession, to review research about the safety of treated lumber in the garden. He concludes that vegetables grown in treated lumber beds do not uptake the chemicals in treated lumber. While I still have hesitations about the worker safety of those who make treated lumber, we do use it for our raised beds because it is the cheapest long lasting material.

To anchor or not to anchor? Many plans recommend digging 6 to 12 inch holes and setting posts in them to anchor the sides of the raised bed. Others use stakes. We subscribed to this philosophy for the first few beds we made. It's not that hard, but we questioned why it was necessary.

In our second round of bed building, we skipped the anchors. In our experience, the raised beds sides do not bow or move. The weight of the soil holds everything in place just fine. If you are looking to save some labor and cost, skipping the corner anchors might be a good choice.

Soil for raised beds can be purchased from a plant nursery, the city, or a dirt and mulch company. If you have a hearty compost bin you can use that too. We purchased comtil from a soil company to fill many of our beds. We mixed in our homegrown compost and some peat moss as well.

If double dug and raised beds aren't your style, there are alternative beds. You might plant in a bucket, straw bale, or potato tower. The most recent edition of Mother Earth News details a [simple soil bag plan](#). Several companies make raised bed corners or corners and sides that gardeners need to simply assemble.

Tasks: Determine what kind of beds you will make. Build and fill them before your planting calendar begins.

Garden Tools

A garden center can be an intimidating place. Implements of all kinds taunt you with promises to work less, remove more weeds, and garden more efficiently.

How many tools does one really need? They are expensive, after all, and there's nothing worse than buying an pricey thingamajig that gets used a few times and then collects dust.

Here are the top five most utilized home garden tools in our stash:



1) Shovel - Don't be afraid to borrow shovels from neighbors until you find the kind you like. I prefer a [D-handled shovel](#) while Alex likes a [long handled one](#). Lil has a [kid sized shovel](#) too!

2) Rake - A [classic bow rake](#) is useful for combing soil, removing leaves and grass in beds, and mixing in amendments. Raking is very easy for children, so we have a child-[sized rake](#) for Lil too.

3) Hand trowel - We have a half dozen hand trowels around the garden of all shapes and sizes. A [thin transplanter](#) is nice for planting small seedlings, a [wide hand trowel](#) is great for moving mulch around, and a [soil scoop](#) is perfect for container gardening.

4) Pruner - If you thrift all other tools, spend money on a quality pair of [pruning shears](#). I use these to trim shrubs, cut back ivy and honeysuckle, and lop off branches.



5) Watering can - We have two European style [plastic watering cans](#). They carry water beyond

the reach of our rain barrel hoses. We also employ them to empty the kiddie swimming pool onto our garden beds.

We acquired most of our tools when a friend convinced us to go to a garden store auction seven years ago. We are forever thankful to [Krush](#) because we won two lots of brand new tools. I think we paid \$40 total for most of the tools we still use today!

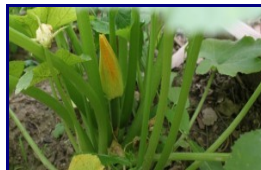
Tools are sometimes found at thrift or garage sales. Perhaps someone in your family has extras in their garage. If you intend to purchase new, look for solid wood handles and beefy hardware. Storing tools upright in a sheltered location will keep them lasting longest, though we leave ours all over the yard for most of the growing season.

Tasks: Take stock of your current tools. Make a plan to acquire others you believe will be essential. Add tools to your holiday or birthday wish lists.

Which Flowers to Pick from the Vegetable Garden

Most annual vegetables send out flowers. It's their way of ensuring their own reproduction.

The home gardener must manage flowers, tending the ones that will develop into fruits we want and removing those that distract the plant from its functions.



Leave the flowers on these plants, as they develop into vegetables:

tomato

cucumber

pepper

eggplant

peas

beans

squash, including zucchini, acorn, and pumpkin (a special case, as the blossoms are edible but if you eat them all, no squash will grow)



Remove the flowers on these plants, as their desirable leaves will bitter if flowers are allowed to bloom:

greens including spinach, kale, mustard, bok choi, broccoli raab, and lettuces, radish, herbs including basil, cilantro, thyme, and mint.

Harvest from these plants before they go to flower:

broccoli

cauliflower

brussel sprouts

These flower stems are edible in addition to their root. If you do not remove these, the plant may use energy producing flowers at the expense of making root bulbs:

garlic (picked as curlicue scapes shown at right)

onion



The delicate **potato flowers** may be picked or left on the plant. Marie Antoinette is said to have enjoyed these beauties in her hair. They may pull a slight bit of water and energy from growing tubers, but I enjoy leaving their blooms in the garden.

Of course, you may grow these **flowers as edibles**:

sunflowers

nasturtium

violet

Task: Take note of which flowers you will need to pick.

Maintaining Growth

With the right plant selections for your space and healthy soil, little effort is needed to maintain your vegetable garden. Still, some weeding, pest management, and watering are inevitable.

Weeding

Weeds are simply successful plants doing their thing in a place you don't want them. I admire weeds, actually, for the fortitude they have to invade garden beds.

My best strategy for weeds is to hand pull them very regularly. In the height of summer, I weed a little bit each day. Small weeds are easier to pull than large ones and getting to them before they flower means I prevent them from reproducing. I do not recommend or use pesticides near food producing plants.

Pests

Garden pests generally come in three varieties: insects, birds, and rodents.

I hand pick insects off my plants when I notice them. If a plant is infested, I use a dilute soap solution of 1 tablespoon Dr. Bronner's universal liquid soap to 4 cups water and spray on the plant every three to five days. Soap prevents eggs from sticking to the plant and insects from breathing through their exoskeleton.

If you struggle with birds nibbling at your plants, netting might be the answer:

- Purchase an appropriate quantity of netting. I have two 14×14 foot packs I purchased from

the local nursery for about \$6 each.

- While it is still carefully folded, cut to the length of your garden bed.
- Spread each piece gently over top of the crop you are protecting. It doesn't have to be perfectly aligned. If your area is particularly windy, use several small sticks to secure the corners.
- When plants have been established, you can try removing the netting. Gently peel it away from the plants, unwinding tendrils if they have grown through the netting.
- Fold your netting to reuse next year. It never seems to pack down to the size it was when I purchased, so we keep a large grocery bag filled with folded up pieces of netting.
- Enjoy your peas/berries/lettuces munch free!

Rodents and deer are the most difficult pests. They can clear a tomato or corn patch of all the ripe fruit in a matter of minutes. Fencing can keep deer out of a garden. Rabbits are said to be repelled by planting marigolds around your vegetable gardens. Our best preventative is having a loud dog who scares away the beasts.

Watering

With proper watering, an edible garden will thrive without necessarily increasing your water bill. Here's how to most effectively give your garden the moisture it needs:

1) Use reclaimed water from a [rain barrel](#) first, if you have it. Also consider other sources of reclaimed water - your child's

swimming pool, water used for rinsing vegetables or thawing meat in the kitchen, or blanching water allowed to come to room temperature.

2) Water only when needed. If it hasn't rained in a day, feel the soil. If it is damp just below the soil, wait another day or two. If it is dry for the first inch or two, get out the hose or watering can.

3) Water deeply. Soak the soil at the base of the plant thoroughly. I typically leave the hose on trees and large shrubs for five to ten minutes. Each 5×5 raised bed gets at least five minutes of watering too. Watering deeply allows the soil to hold the moisture for an extended time and gives the whole root base a chance to absorb water.

4) Water at morning or night. If you water in midday, it evaporates so quickly that the plant loses its chance to absorb the moisture. We typically water in the evening after dinner so the plants have all night to do their thing.

5) Pay special attention to containers. They will need watering more often than beds, up to once a day in hot weather. Place containers closely together to help them retain moisture and not dry out too quickly.

6) Watering is a great chore for kids. They love to use the hose! If you are using rain barrel water, remind them not to drink it.

Tasks: Be observant and take action to protect your growing plants when necessary.

Harvesting and Storing Garden Produce

For best flavor, pick produce at their peak ripeness, indicated by bright color all over the fruit, firm skin, and full heavy form.

Tomatoes and Peppers - Gently twist or tug the fruit to remove it from the stem. Store at room temperature for 3 - 5 days. If fruits are slightly under ripe, they may ripen in a sunny window.

Zucchini, summer squash and cucumbers - Gently twist or tug the fruit to remove it from the stem. Zucchini and squash flowers can be eaten raw or stuffed and fried. Store at room temperature for 3 days or in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Broccoli, cauliflower, and brussel sprouts - Use a paring knife to cut florets from their thick stem. Leave the plant in the ground for a small second growth.

Leaf vegetables (chard, kale, spinach, lettuces, and herbs) - Clip leaves with scissors or a sharp knife. New growth will occur rapidly and can be harvested again and again. Store in a loosely sealed bag or container in the refrigerator for 3-5 days.

Beans and Peas - Pick pods from the vines when the beans are fully developed (for peas, lima and dry beans) or just before development (for fresh eating beans). Store in a loosely sealed plastic bag or container in the refrigerator for 3-5 days. Beans and peas may offer a second harvest after you pick the first.

Strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries - Pick when fully dark colored. Eat immediately or store in a loosely tied bag or container in the refrigerator for 2 days.

Tasks: Pick and enjoy your harvest!

Preserving Garden Vegetables and Fruits

Often your garden will produce more than you can handle at a given time. The guide below suggests ways of preserving fresh fruits and vegetables for use beyond their growing season.

Spread **berries** out on a cookie sheet in a single layer, then place directly in the freezer. Wait about 8 hours, or overnight, and then transfer the berries to a large freezer-safe bag or container.

This same method works for any berry-like fruit including blueberries, grapes, and cranberries. Slice peaches, apricots, strawberries, pitted plums and cherries—just be sure they are in a single layer and barely touching before they hit the freezer so they will separate easily afterwards.

Green beans, corn, peas, squash, zucchini, swiss chard and spinach can all be frozen after a quick blanch. Prep the vegetable appropriately by removing corn from cob, cutting the ends of beans, and slicing or shredding the zucchini. Drop your produce in lightly salted boiling water for just two minutes. Scoop out the produce then drop it in ice water to stop the cooking. Towel dry or use a salad spinner, then place them in a freezer bag and the freezer.

Add flavor to soups and sauces year round by freezing **herbs**. You can place fresh herbs in ice cube trays, cover them with water, and place the trays in the freezer. Once frozen, remove from the trays and store in freezer bags or containers. To preserve basil or herb pesto, do the same thing: pour into ice cube trays or small bowls, freeze, remove from container, and place in a storage bag or container.

Carrots and zucchini can be shredded and frozen for additions into baked goods later. Both can be dehydrated too.

Winter squash like acorn and pumpkin can be cooked, cubed and frozen, or cooked, pureed and frozen.

Beets, potatoes, and winter squash can be kept at cellar temperature (55 deg F) uncovered for many weeks.

Save fresh **apples** in the fridge by washing them, place in plastic grocery store bag still wet, and shut loosely. They keep for months fresh this way. (Tip from Charlie of www.WindyHillAppleFarm.com)

Many fruits and vegetables can be preserved for years by canning them fresh, as sauces, or jams. Consult the Hounds in the Kitchen [canning section](#) for recipes and recommendations.

Finally, if you are truly overwhelmed with vegetables, consider giving away or donating your excess. Neighbors or coworkers will appreciate your gifts. Check with local settlement houses or food pantries to find one that accepts home grown produce.

Tasks: Make a plan for what you will do with your excess produce. Gathering canning or freezing supplies.

Enjoy!



Creating a garden is one of life's greatest pleasures for many people. May your plants grow well and your life be enriched by tending the land.

For tips during the season, new and gardening workshops, and personalized assistance, visit [Hounds In The Kitchen](http://www.HoundsInTheKitchen.com) regularly or [contact Rachel by email](#).