



beginners guide to growing your own food.

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Tools & Equipment

You need very little equipment to start growing your own food but having a few handy tools will make gardening jobs easier and help keep your plants happy and healthy.

Other tools to help

- A cushion or pad to kneel on
- Rake for levelling the ground
- Shovel to move a lot of earth easily
- Wheelbarrow for bigger jobs

Tool storage

Use an old bucket or caddy (anything with a handle) to store your essential tools. This will help you easily carry your tools as you garden.

Tool care

Look after your tools so they will last longer. Make sure you wipe them down before you put them away and wash dirty gloves.

Garden journal

You might want to keep a journal to record your journey. It's a great tool to keep track of what you have planted, dates, difficulties, harvest quantities etc.

Gardening gloves

To keep your hands clean and help prevent blisters

Hand trowel

For making drills and weeding

Hand fork

For harvesting and weeding

Plant labels

For keeping track of your vegetables. You can make your own with many things such as old plastic cut into strips or wooden sticks

Tape measure/ruler

For measuring spaces between plants

Watering can/hose

For watering plants

Scissors/knife

For harvesting your produce

String and cane sticks

For supporting crops as they grow



Prepare your growing space

Whether you're growing in a container or a bed, it is important that you prepare your growing space to give your seeds the best chance to grow into strong and healthy plants. Make sure your soil is healthy and that you use good quality, organic compost as this is full of nutrients that your plant will love.

For containers

- Make sure your container has drainage holes. Use a drill to space holes evenly across the base.
- Cover the holes with jagged stones or broken crockery to stop them clogging with compost.
- Fill the container with compost, leaving about 2 cm space between the surface of the compost and the rim.

For beds

- Clear your growing area as much as possible, removing any weeds and plants that will be competition and leave you with smaller, less productive plants.
- Cover the area with at least 3–5cm of compost and use a rake or fork to break up any clumps and spread it evenly across the surface.



Container ideas

You can use anything - but make sure there is enough space to grow and that there are drainage holes on the bottom. If indoors, make sure you use under-trays or plates to catch water overflow and protect surfaces.

Great soil

Your plants will flourish in good quality soil and struggle in poor soil. Healthy soil is full of nutrients that feed and nurture crops. It will also mean less time watering and fighting pests.

Compost

This is aged, decayed plant and organic matter that is nutrient rich and helps change the structure of soil and supports plant life. Composted animal manure is especially good for growing vegetables as is mushroom compost. To ensure you have good quality organic compost look for the Soil Association stamp.

Start with easy crops

Some crops are easier to grow than others. As you gain confidence and skills you can include more challenging crops.

Easy vegetables to grow

- beans
- beetroot
- carrots
- courgettes
- cucumbers
- herbs
- lettuce and other leafy greens
- onions
- peas
- peppers
- potatoes
- radishes
- tomatoes

Easy fruit to grow

- apples
- figs
- pears
- plums
- raspberries
- strawberries

What to grow

When choosing what crops to grow, think about what you like to eat, how much space you have and what is easy to grow. Courgettes, for example, need a lot of room and will take up lots of valuable space but they are easy to grow. Some vegetables, fruit and herbs are perennial and will establish roots and recrop each year so you want to make sure they have a permanent spot in your growing space.

Consider your space

Consider your growing space before you decide what to grow. How much light and space do you have? Is there direct sunlight and for how long?

Buying seeds

Seeds are available to buy at any garden centre, most supermarkets and online. Seed packets will have detailed descriptions of the best time to sow, how to sow, and how long it will take to harvest. Not all seeds are alike. Look for ones that are organic, disease resistant and in date. Seeds may last for a few years, but the best results will be from recently harvested seeds.

Collecting your own seeds

It's possible to collect and save seeds from certain fruit and vegetables, dry them out and store them safely for harvest the following year.

Plug plants

Another option is to buy plug seedlings and transplant them in your growing space. This is a more expensive option and not as satisfying as growing from seed but it can be a helpful short cut. Choose healthy looking plants with sturdy stems, no yellowing and white tip root ends.

5 top veg to grow in pots:

1. salad leaves
2. radishes
3. chillies
4. beetroot
5. tomatoes

5 top fruit to grow in pots:

1. strawberries
2. blueberries
3. raspberries
4. cherries
5. blackberries



Sowing your seeds

Now that your growing area is prepared, you are ready to sow your seeds. Each plant will have its own requirements and you will need to check individual instructions. Make sure you checked the spacing for each of your plants and plan accordingly as well if they need transplanting.

Indoor sowing for transplant

- Fill your seedling trays or pots loosely with good quality compost
- Place 2 to four seeds on the surface of the compost and gently mix in compost.
- Label each pot so you can remember what you've planted - most seedlings look similar.
- Mist seedlings with water and, if needed, cover to create humidity dome and keep in warm place.
- Once seedlings start to emerge, remove any covering and move into the sunniest spot in the house.
- Once full set of leaves develop, they can be gently transplanted to a larger container. Take care not to disturb the fragile roots.
- As they grow, 'harden' them off to prepare them for transplant outside. This means moving the outside for longer periods of time before bringing them back inside.
- After the hardening period, you can transplant your seedling to its outside container where it will continue to grow to harvest.

Direct outdoor sowing

- Make a drill in the compost using the edge of your hand trowel in a line where you want to sow your seeds. Different seeds need drills of different depths so check out your seeds' particular needs.
- If it's dry weather, water your drill before sowing seeds.
- Take small pinches of seeds and scatter them down the drill line sparsely and evenly. It takes practice to sow the right amount so don't worry if you sow too many seeds, you can thin them out later.
- Push the soil back over the drill with your hand to cover the seeds.
- Water where you have just sown the seeds.
- Make sure to label what you have sown with plant labels.



Label ideas

Plant labels can be bought but they can also easily be made with available materials. Make sure you write the plant name in waterproof pen.

- lolly sticks
- painted rocks
- strips of plastic cut from containers
- wooden sticks

Thinning out

Once seeds have sprouted, look at how close each plant is to one another. Some plants will grow too close to each other and crowd the growing space so you will need to remove the smaller, less robust plants to give remaining plants space to flourish.

Watering tips

- Aim to water in the morning if you can. Watering in the evening means the soil is damp in the night, which encourages slugs to come and munch on all your crops!
- Overwatering is worse than underwatering. If leaves are turning yellow, they have been overwatered. Too much water can lead to 'damping off' disease which kills plants as it stops oxygen getting to the roots.

Homemade fertiliser

In large container fill about ¼ quarter full with

- grass cuttings
- egg shells (rinsed+crushed)
- banana peels, chopped
- coffee grounds
- fruit or vegetable peelings

Top with water and let steep for 2 weeks. Strain and use to treat soil when watering.

Nourish, feed and water

Nourishing and watering your seedlings will help to ensure a successful harvest. Watering correctly is vital for your seedling to thrive and survive.

Feeding

Compost and fertilisers help nourish and improve your seedling's health, pest and disease-resistance, and crop production. You can purchase organic, water soluble plant fertiliser or make your own with compost.

For containers, start fertilising twice a week and feed the plants in your garden beds every 2 to 3 weeks. Your plants will be larger and will produce more harvest. They'll also be better able to fend off pests and disease, and will have better resistance to drought and other weather stress.

Watering

It is important to keep your seeds moist while they are trying to germinate so make sure you water your growing area regularly to avoid seeds drying out.

Once your seeds have germinated, your seedlings will need less water as they stay moist for longer periods. As they grow, they take up water more quickly so will need more regular watering. As a general rule, if when you push your finger about 5cm deep into the soil it is still damp, there is no need to water. If your seedling are wilting they need water quick!

It is much better to water little and often as opposed in infrequent soaking. Whenever possible, water the soil, not the leaves. This is especially important with tomatoes and courgettes as mildew can grow on leaves.

In warm weather you may need to water twice a day. Whereas, in cool weather, you may be able to water every other day.



Harvest your crops

You've nurtured your plants from seeds all the way to being ready to harvest. It's time to delight in the fruits (and veg) of your labour!

Harvest time

Each crop has its own optimum harvest time and many will grow bigger if you let them. Sometimes this results in less flavour. The following taste better if picked smaller -

- beans
- courgettes
- cucumbers
- peas
- radishes

Some will bolt and develop seed heads with taste deteriorating. These include:

- broccoli
- herbs like basil and parsley
- lettuce and other leafy greens

Keeping picking

The more you pick of these, the more the plants will produce:

- beans
- courgettes
- cucumbers
- peas
- tomatoes

Stay in the ground

Root crops, like beetroot, carrot and radishes, will grow larger as they mature, but smaller ones are often sweeter. Be careful how you dig them up, just loosen the soil around the base and gently tug. Radishes grow really fast you can re-plant for a second harvest. Onions, garlic and potatoes tops will go brown and wilt, giving the signal that it's time to harvest.

Harvest tips

Harvest herbs by snipping off bunches of leaves with scissors, close to the soil. This will encourage them to keep regrowing new leaves for you to enjoy throughout the season.

Harvest lettuce and other 'come again' leaves by cutting off as many outer leaves as you need, leaving the middle to keep growing and producing.

Harvest tomatoes when they release from their stems with a gentle twist

Harvest root crops by grabbing the leaves and twisting and pulling the roots out of the compost.

Harvest courgettes by cutting them with a knife right at the top of their stem, as close to the plant as possible.

Harvest edible flowers by snipping off the flowers. Taking more flowers will encourage more flowers to grow.

Companion plants

Some flowers are great pest repellents.

- Marigolds repel aphids, mosquitos and small rabbits.
- Petunias repel aphids, asparagus beetles, leafhoppers, squash bugs, and tomato hornworms.
- Geraniums can repel leafhoppers, mosquitoes, and other types of insects.
- Nasturtiums can potentially repel aphids, cabbage loopers, squash bugs, whiteflies, and a variety of beetles.
- Chrysanthemums are great for repelling ants, cockroaches, Japanese beetles, ticks, and more.
- Alliums are great for repelling aphids, cabbage worms, carrot flies, and slugs.
- Beans planted near potatoes will repel potato beetles
- Carrot fly can cause a lot of damage to carrots. Planting them between onions confuses the flies as the onion masks the smell of the carrots.

Protect your crops

Many harmful pests can destroy your crops and it's useful to find ways to get rid of them without using harmful chemicals. Simple measures can be taken to discourage them, from planting companion plants, using netting or cover or some organic sprays. Keep your garden tidy and remove unwanted growth and debris where pests can hide. Some diseases can also affect your crops and need vigilance.

Defences against pests

Many harmful insects can munch through your crops. Some of the worst are

- aphids cluster under leaves and stems attack most vegetable plants. Knock them off with water from a hose or use insecticidal soap spray.
- Cabbage worms attack the broccoli family and you need to handpick them off and drop them into a container of soapy water.
- Colorado Potato beetles attack potatoes, tomatoes and other plant. Handpick them off and discard larvae infected leaves.
- Slug and snails like moist seedlings so water in the morning and leave beer traps to catch them. Copper bands also discourage them.

Helpful insects

There are some insects that work as pollinators or predators of other insects. Ladybirds for example eat large quantities of aphids. There are flowers, such as marigolds, that help keep pests away and attract additional pollinators such as bees, which may end up resulting in a larger harvest for you.

Diseases

There are some some diseases that will affect your crops and you need to keep an eye out for them. Blight affects tomatoes and potatoes. Try an organic fungicide and try not to wet foliage when watering. Practice crop rotation as well.



links and resources

There is a wealth of information available online or in books and magazines. Here are a few sites that we recommend:-

Allotment Vegetable Growing: www.allotment.org.uk

BBC Gardening: www.bbc.co.uk/gardening

Garden Organic: charity and seed catalogue. www.gardenorganic.org.uk

Square Foot Gardening: www.squarefootgardening.com

The Royal Horticultural Society: www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own

Charles Dowding No Dig: <https://charlesdowding.co.uk/>

Sarah Raven: www.sarahraven.com

Easy to grow plant summary

Plant name	plant seed indoors	direct sow	when to plant	size	daily sun hours	water needs	harvest time	good for pots
 broccoli	Y		warm spring	H 0.6m+ W 0.3m+	6-8	medium	mid-late summer	
 carrots		Y	warm spring	H 0.3m+ W 0.15m+	6-8	medium	late summer/ autumn	Y
 courgettes		Y	warm spring	H 1.5m W 1m	6-8	high	mid-late summer	
 cucumbers		Y	warm spring	H .5m W .6m	6-8	high	mid summer	Y
 herbs (basil, parsley)	Y		cool spring	H 0.3m W 0.15m	5-7	low	all spring and summer	Y
 Lettuce and other greens	Y	Y	cool+ warm spring	H 0.3m W 0.2m	5-7	medium	all spring and summer	Y
 onions		Y	warm spring	H 0.3m W 0.15m	5-8	medium	late summer, autumn	Y
 peas		Y	cool spring	H 0.6m W 0.3m	5-7	medium	early to mid summer	Y



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opportunity to grow**

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