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LIFE: ARTICLE

GROW YOUR OWN FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

Dig It, Baby

A rookie's guide to gardening--no rubber clogs required

Celeste Perron

If your idea of harvesting fresh fruits and veggies consists of stuffing them in a plastic bag at the supermarket, we're right there with you. But we were surprised to discover that growing your own isn't anywhere near as time-consuming as the floppy-hat-wearing biddies wandering the nursery aisles of Home Depot make it look. "People don't realize just how easy a small garden is," says Rebecca Cole, a garden designer in New York City and cohost of the syndicated gardening radio show *On the House*. "And nothing beats the taste of food that was plucked off the stem just hours earlier." Beyond fuller, richer flavors, home growing will also allow you to avoid dangerous pesticides, nasty bacteria, and weird wax coatings. Follow this easy game plan and you'll have the makings of salads and smoothies at your fingertips, whether you're planting them in a spacious backyard or on the landing of your fire escape.

Be a Pothead

Got a big bright window? Then you can have a container garden this summer (or all year round, if you're lucky enough to live in a sun-drenched region). Containers even have advantages over planting in the ground: "You can move pots in and out of the sun and control soil quality," says Orla Murphy-LaScola, an avid gardener and the owner of American Seasons Restaurant on Nantucket. The main drawbacks: You're limited to small and medium-size plants, and potted produce needs tons of H₂O — but if you spend a little more on a self-watering container (fill once a week and water seeps in slowly; \$59, [Earth Box](#)), you don't even have to worry about that. To make it happen:

1. Shop for plants, containers, and soil. Choose plants that have the same sun and water needs and grow to roughly the same height (look for height info on the plant's label or at [My Garden Guide](#)). That way, one won't hog all the others' rays. Avoid seedlings with the words "will spread" on the label or your garden will fall victim to root wars. And, trust us, you want seedlings (baby plants from a local nursery), not seeds. Starting from scratch can lead to a heap of hassles, since most seeds need carefully monitored conditions and a couple of months of pampering to flourish. If what you want are easy results, leave stage one to the greenhouse gurus.

Now pick your container. Any kind will do, provided it has a drainage hole, but choose terra-cotta if you can afford it. "Plants love terra-cotta because it's porous and it breathes," Cole says. Make sure the pot is big enough. "Read the label to see the ideal amount of root space, but it's usually safe to give plants only half that," she says. Throw a few bags of potting soil (which eliminates the need for compost or fertilizer) into your cart and head for checkout.

2. Combine all three. Grab your container, place a terra-cotta chip over the drainage hole to keep the soil in but allow water out, then fill it with soil. Dig a hole deep enough that the top of the seedling's root base will be even with the rest of the soil in the pot. Gently but firmly pack the sucker in.

3. Add sun and lots of water. Your plants are like Lindsay Lohan on vacation — total UV junkies. The ideal spot for your pot is one that will catch rays from early morning through evening, like directly in front of a large, south-facing window. "For the first week after planting, seedlings will be in shock," says Julie Cummins, director of education at the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture in San Francisco. "Soak them daily to help the roots settle in." General guidelines for watering containers: Add water until it drains out the bottom, wait 5 minutes, then add half as much more. Always empty excess water from the drainage tray, since perpetually damp roots will rot. After week 1, use the finger test to determine when it's time for more: Stick a digit into the dirt every day; when the soil is dry on the surface but damp 2 inches down, it's time to douse it.

Hit the Ground

In-ground gardening is a wee bit harder than planting in pots, since you have to prep the soil, but you can grow bigger goodies like corn and fruit trees. The how-tos:

1. Swap dirt for soil. You know the corner of your yard that's flooded with sun all day in the summer? That's the one you want to plant in. Use a hoe and shovel to dig up the top 4 inches of soil, then replace it with firmly packed potting soil (you'll need about one 26-quart bag of soil per 3 square feet).

2. Dig and drop. Create a hole the size of the root base and lower the seedling in, making sure that the top of the root base is even with the surrounding soil. Gently pack the dirt around each plant. Once all of your seedlings are in the ground, water them frequently — daily during the first week, then often enough so the dirt is wet 6 inches below the surface when you first water and still wet 1 to 2 inches down the next time. When your plants are flourishing, you should have to drench them only every 5 days or so, as long as the weather isn't scorching hot. "Long, infrequent watering is better than short, frequent watering because it encourages roots to grow deeper," Cummins says.

3. Ward off pests. "Since rot attracts mildew and bugs, keeping your garden free of dead leaves and rotted fruit is first priority," Cummins says. When you do need to strike back at bugs, use effective but nontoxic pesticides to protect kids and pets (see "Keep Your Garden Green" for some options). Don't be alarmed if you find yourself plotting the exile of a cute, fuzzy bunny. If Peter Cottontail is eating your carrots, the bastard is gonna go down.

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