

Getting Started with Gardening

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If you've never really gardened before, getting started might seem overwhelming. But it's actually quite easy to start growing some fresh, nutritious and tasty vegetables in your own yard, community garden plot, or even in containers on a deck or patio. Here are some simple steps to growing a home garden.

First, find a sunny spot. Vegetables need full sun, which means at least 6 hours of direct mid-day sunlight each day. The area should also be well drained, meaning water doesn't puddle or significantly run over the area during heavy rains. Plan how big you want your garden to be, based on what you want to grow. If you are a first-time gardener, start small!! It's better to have a smaller garden, where you can keep up with maintenance, than to have a big garden that gets overrun with weeds and ends in frustration.

Once you have your space determined, it's important to remove the existing vegetation, especially if it's grass. You can rent a sod-cutter and remove the majority of the grass, or if the area is small enough, you can remove it by hand using shovels and shaking out the clumps of sod. If you are able to plan ahead, you can cover the area with a tarp or black plastic to smother out the existing vegetation, but that takes at least a month, so is best done the year before planting.

Doing a soil test before planting is always a good idea. A soil test from the University of Wisconsin Soil Testing Laboratory will tell you not only what type of soil you have, but also the soil's pH, amount of organic matter, and phosphorous and potassium levels. The most important thing you will get from the lab are specific recommendations of what to add to your soil to get your nutrient levels and pH where they need to be to grow vegetables. If you don't have time to get a soil test done before planting, you can send in a sample later and still make amendments, but it's easier to do it at the start. Contact the local Extension office for information on how to collect and submit a soil test.

If your soil is sandy or heavy clay, adding composted organic matter will be extremely helpful. Compost will help sandy soil hold more moisture and nutrients, and will make clay soil lighter and better drained. Adding compost to any soil is beneficial as it adds all the trace nutrients and improves overall soil structure. Work up the soil with a rototiller or shovel, and incorporate compost before planting.

Once your soil is ready and smoothed out, you're ready to plant! If you're new to gardening, start with some of the easiest plants. Crops like beans, beets, radishes, lettuce, potatoes, onions, squash, herbs and tomatoes are good options to start with. You can purchase seeds in packets at local stores. Read the seed packet for a description of the variety, how much space it needs, and when it should be planted. When planting in the garden, be sure to follow the spacing directions on the packet so that plants don't compete with each other as they grow. Place seeds on the soil, cover slightly, and lightly firm the soil in place. Generally, seeds are planted 1-2 times their smallest diameter deep. For some seeds, such as beans, that might be one-half inch deep, while others, like lettuce will be barely covered and only about 1/16 inch deep.

Potatoes are planted by burying a dormant piece that has several "eyes" on it about 3-4 inches deep. Onions are available in "sets", which are small, dormant onions, or sometimes as plants, which are green and more perishable. Onion sets should be planted with the root plate downward and the bulb just barely covered with soil. Onion plants should be planted so the soil level is at the bottom of the leaves where the color changes.

Some garden plants are best started indoors or in greenhouses several weeks before our growing season begins, so that harvest can occur before Wisconsin's relatively short growing season ends. Those include tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, broccoli, cauliflower, herbs and others. These will be available in greenhouses in spring, and you can purchase the number and varieties of plants that you want. Or, you can start them yourself indoors from seed, usually beginning in late March or early April.

Once planted, your plants need water! Seeds should be watered with a fine mist or stream of water so that they are not dislodged prior to sprouting. They will need to be kept wet until they germinate, so if there is no rain, they should be gently sprinkled daily. Transplants should be watered thoroughly to settle the soil around them, and then watered every other day or so until established. While you want to make sure they have enough water, overwatering can cause problems too, so allow the very surface of the soil around transplants to get dry before watering.

Fertilize according to your soil test results, or, if you weren't yet able to complete a soil test, use a balanced fertilizer, such as a 10-10-10 (10% nitrogen, 10% phosphorus, and 10% potassium) analysis. You can use either a granular or a liquid fertilizer; just be sure to follow the package instructions for application rate. Most crops in decent soil will only need one fertilization for the season. Some, like onions, benefit from another dose of fertilizer in mid-July. Too much fertilizer can cause lots of leaves and foliage, and few fruits, and can also burn or damage plants, so more is not better. Excess fertilizer also encourages fast weed growth!

Weed control is your next concern. Weeds can grow very quickly and take over your garden if they are not controlled. The best way to reduce weeding in the garden is through mulching, to smother out weed seeds that are in the soil. One of the best methods is to cover all unplanted areas, such as space between rows or transplants, with a layer of newspaper (about 6 sheets thick) or plain brown corrugated cardboard, covered with some type of organic mulch such as straw, dried grass clippings, leaves or pine needles. The less open soil there is, the fewer weeds you will have. You will still need to hand-weed next to plants, and it's important to pull them early, when they are very small. Plan to weed every few days early on, as weeds can grow very quickly. The newspaper or cardboard and mulch are all organic and will decompose throughout the season and can be worked into the soil in fall or next spring.

Finally, keep an eye on your plants as the season progresses for any problems, such as diseases or insects. For help diagnosing problems or identifying insects, contact your county UW-Extension office. Use a soaker hose to water the soil when needed, and avoid overhead sprinklers as wet leaves encourage disease. Vegetables require an inch of water per week, either by rain or irrigation. Put a rain gauge in your garden so that you can monitor rainfall. Overwatering can cause poor growth and root rots, so be sure the soil surface is dry about a half inch down before watering once plants are established.

Monitor your developing plants and begin harvest as soon as things are ready! Don't let them get overripe, as they will degrade in quality quickly. It's usually best to harvest in the morning, when plants are still cool and not stressed from the heat of the day. When fall approaches, watch the weather for frost warnings. Often you can cover your plants to protect from light frost and extend the growing season. If a hard freeze is predicted, harvest any above-ground produce, such as the last ripening tomatoes, peppers or squash. Root crops such as potatoes, onions and carrots can be harvested after frost, but before the ground freezes.

Fall cleanup of the garden can help prevent overwintering of diseases and insects. If you had any disease problems, those plants should be removed from the garden and disposed of properly. If there were no serious disease issues, removing the dead plants, but leaving mulch in place can protect your soil from erosion and loss of organic matter over the winter. Any soil amendments needed to adjust pH or add organic matter can be done in fall or the following spring prior to planting.

Growing your own vegetables at home isn't hard, but it does take diligence throughout the growing season. While you're at it, add some annual flowers, such as sunflowers, zinnias or marigolds here and there to attract butterflies and increase your enjoyment of the garden. The University of Wisconsin Division of Extension has many great resources to help you be successful. Check out <https://learningstore.extension.wisc.edu/> for a wide variety of gardening publications, or contact your county UW-Extension office. To reach Diana Alfuth, UW-Extension Horticulture Outreach Specialist, with other questions call 715-273-6781.