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## Homegrown and Healthy

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Tending a vegetable garden is a prescription-free way to lower blood pressure, promote heart health, and reduce the risk of age-related memory loss, research from *Good Housekeeping* shows. Weeding and digging also burns lots of calories while exposing you to vitamin D-producing sunlight.

And, of course, gardeners are more apt to eat plenty of nutritious plant-based foods.

A vegetable patch can be a very effective stress reliever. Gardeners who worked outdoors for 30 minutes were found to have brighter moods and lower levels of salivary cortisol—the stress hormone that contributes to belly fat—than those who relaxed by reading indoors for the same amount of time, according to a 2011 Dutch study in the *Journal of Health Psychology*.

Light gardening and yard work can keep you trim by burning about 330 calories per hour—that’s more than you’d burn while walking, bicycling, or doing a light workout with weights, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Gardening can keep your mind sharper longer. In a 2006 Australian study of more than 2,800 people over age 60, daily gardening was associated with a 36 percent decrease in the risk of dementia. Getting your hands in the dirt regularly also exposes your immune system to healthy microorganisms,

according to researchers at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Inspired to start your own garden? Spring is still a way off, but the frosty months ahead are the perfect time to make preparations for a vegetable and herb garden for when the first signs of spring appear.

A rich resource for beginner gardeners is a local cooperative extension office, which provides information for homeowners about gardening basics and what grows well in their area. Each county in the U.S. has an extension office that works closely with experts from universities and helps provide information about gardening, agriculture, and pest control.

In most cases, you can find the phone number for your local county extension office in the government section of your phone book or by Googling your state name followed by “extension office.”

But no matter how you plan to get going on your garden plot, there are a few key things every aspiring vegetable gardener should consider.

### Select a Spot

Inspect the sunny areas in your yard. Most leafy and root vegetables need six to eight hours of direct sunlight to thrive, while plants with fruits—like cucumbers and tomatoes—require eight to 10 hours. That’s because generating flowers, fruits, and seeds requires the plant to use more energy from sunlight.

You don’t need a big garden at first. “Start small, even as small as four feet by four feet,” says Lucy Bradley, professor of urban horticulture at North Carolina State University and extension specialist at North Carolina State Extension. It’s better to be successful with a small garden than to overextend. If you don’t have a yard, a few 12-inch pots on a deck are enough to provide a household with plenty of lettuce, carrots, radishes, and herbs for salads. You can expand the garden next year as you gain experience and confidence.

Gardens tend to do better on high ground where there is good air movement and less frost. Vegetables need an average of one inch of water per week, so choose a plot that’s convenient to a water source—that way you won’t have to drag a hose too far.

### Decide What to Plant

Make a list of what you want to plant, noting the target planting date for each vegetable. “Grow what you and your family like to eat, what is hard to find, expensive to purchase, and what thrives in your climate and soil,” says Bradley.

If you like making homemade pizza, plant heirloom tomatoes, basil, oregano, and peppers. Baby lettuces, dill, and cucumbers could go outside your back door, accessible for salads. Foodies might want to plant specialty vegetables like broccolini or bok choy that aren’t always available in stores. For yards with limited sun, stick to shade-tolerant options like broccoli, cabbage, kale, lettuce, spinach, beets, or carrots.

Plan for a staggered harvest. Arugula and butter lettuce are fast-growing for early harvest. Kale and spinach are known as *cut and come again vegetables*, because you can snip some leaves and come back for more a few days later. Peas and green beans take time to ripen, though their flavor when you snack off the vine is bright and alive compared to store-bought ones.

Consider adding some edible flowers to your garden like early American settlers did. Marigolds and

chrysanthemums, in addition to being a treat for the eyes, provide a habitat for beneficial insects, enhancing pollination. Squash flowers are a delicious treat when battered and fried. Bright orange and red nasturtiums add a peppery punch to salads, plus they deter deer. Minced fresh flowers can be folded into cheese spreads, herb butters, or pancakes.

### **Evaluate the Soil**

The ideal soil holds air, water, and nutrients in a balance of sand, silt, clay, and organic matter. The easiest way to find out what kind of soil you have is to pick up a trowel's worth and hold it in your hands. Rich, healthy soil is something you know when you feel it: It's easy to dig and drains well.

A simple home soil test purchased from your local gardening store can help you identify your soil so you can improve it—whether it needs fertility, absorbency, or drainage.

Or you may want to have your soil evaluated professionally by your local extension office. In most counties, you would simply dig up a few soil samples for testing and mail them in. In a few weeks, you'd receive an online report about the makeup of your soil, the pH level, nutrient content, and recommendations for lime or fertilizer to apply to fortify it.

You want soil that is dark, crumbly, and literally full of life. Based on region and climate, though, soil can be gritty, powdery, or sticky when wet. But if you're working with the red clay of Georgia, the sandy clay of Texas, or the caliche of Arizona, it doesn't mean you won't be able to grow a healthy garden.

Keep in mind that using native plants from your region and climate will make your job easier, as these plants are likely well-adapted to the soil of your area.

### **Consider Raised Beds**

If your soil isn't the best, a raised-bed garden may be a good option. This method of gardening can help keep pathway weeds from your garden soil, prevent soil compaction, provide good drainage, extend the planting season, and serve as a barrier to pests such as slugs and snails.

"Raised beds are useful where the ground soil stays too moist for healthy roots or the soil is highly compacted or contaminated," says Bradley. Raised beds can be fancy or simple, and they can be built from wood, stone, or any materials that haven't been treated with chemicals, since those could leach into the soil.

A common approach is to use stacked 2" by 6" boards joined in the corners by 4" by 4" posts. Another approach is to use concrete blocks. While less pleasing to the eye, they are inexpensive to source and easy to use. On the market are also prefab raised garden bed solutions, which are made from long-lasting polyethylene that is UV stabilized and food grade, so it will not leach undesirable chemicals into the soil or deteriorate from being outside in the elements.

### **Start Seedlings Indoors**

For a head start, you can start seedlings indoors while it's still cold out. About six to eight weeks before the planting date, sow the seeds in containers of soil, following the packet directions. As a rule of thumb, plant the seeds two or three times as deep as the diameter of the seed, and cover lightly but firmly, making sure there is good contact with the soil.

Cucumbers, for example, need soil temperatures of at least 60 degrees, but you can plant the seeds

about one inch deep in cups or pots. Once they reach four inches in height, they're ready for transplanting. Before moving seedlings, take a few days or a week to harden them to the weather by putting them outside for a few hours each day. The plants should be spaced two feet apart in rows that are four feet apart, or near a trellis so they can climb upward.

After the danger of frost is past, you can plant the rest of your seeds and add small plants from garden centers, catalogs, or online. Staggering planting of, say, sections of lettuce, at one- to two-week intervals, sets you up for continual harvest later in the season. As you harvest a crop, you can replant that area. As you care for your green charges, you might find yourself so absorbed by their natural rhythms that time flies by unnoticed, worries fall away, and your heart rate slows. Between eating lots of fresh produce, spending more time in the sunshine, and getting regular exercise, don't be surprised if your next medical checkup shows positive results.

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