

Beginning Gardening 101- Where to Start??

Have you thought about starting a home garden, but aren't quite sure how to get started? Are you one of those people that feel you just don't have a green thumb? Well, I am here to tell you that it is totally possible to be successful with just a few tips and tricks. When I started gardening a few years ago, I knew relatively little about how to have a successful garden. I decided to jump into it, because if I waited for my life to slow down enough to research all there was to know, it just wouldn't happen. After some successes and failures (more success than failure, thankfully), I have learned a lot! I still don't know all there is to know by any means, but that's the cool part about life, right? We are always on a path of life long learning! Well, it doesn't have to be all that hard. I have provided some hopefully beneficial information here so that perhaps the idea of gardening at home can be a reality for you!

Where to start?

The first step to a successful garden is great soil. Unfortunately, our city has some pretty lousy soil, if you can even call it that! It's more rock than anything else, which I'm sure you know if you've ever tried to dig a hole more than a couple inches into the ground. Not the best for plants that are trying to establish a root system. Raised beds are the best option to contain a large amount of soil above ground for your plants to thrive. There's lots of ways this can be accomplished. A popular way to do this is by creating a bed out of treated lumber any size you desire. You could use large boulders and a landscaping retaining wall if you wanted to also. Cinder blocks are also a viable option. Really anything that will contain your soil so it doesn't wash away when you water. You want to have at least a foot of soil ideally.



What about container gardening? Do I have to use a raised bed?

You can be very successful with container gardening with a couple things in mind. Make sure you have a big enough container for the plant that you are growing. Things like leafy greens don't need much soil, so you can grow a ton of salad in a container fairly easily. Some plants will need more space as they get bigger such as tomato plants. Not that you can't grow tomatoes in a container, but you will want it to be a large, deep container with several gallons of soil for best results.

What type of soil should I use and where do I get it?

There are many soil and mulch suppliers around the city and they all carry different types of soil. Ask them what they offer for gardening and they will let you know what they have available. They usually call it a "gardeners mix" or "raised bed mix." This type of soil contains composted manure...yes that's right...the stinky stuff is what helps those veggies thrive! Don't worry, it is completely safe. It has been heated and processed at such a high temperature that it doesn't contain the bacteria that can make you sick. Having the proper soil is very important for a successful garden. I get my soil from Texas Soil and Stone, but there are others you can go through also. If you have a pick up truck, you can get between a yard to a yard and a half in the back of the truck. If not, they will deliver the soil to you for about \$50.

What should I plant?

This is probably one of the most critical parts of gardening. Knowing what to plant and when. Growing seasons vary greatly all over the country, so what grows well somewhere else, may not grow well in San Antonio at all! The good thing, is that we can pretty much grow all year long if we have the right set up in place. I have listed below the main things you should be growing during the two different growing seasons we have. This is not an exhaustive list, but it should be helpful to get you started. I recommend you check out “The Old Farmers Almanac” online and check out their growing calendars. You can put in your zip code and it will give you all the details about what to grow when and if you should start seeds indoors or outdoors etc. It is hard to grow many things from seeds. It’s not as simple as sticking a seed in the dirt! Sometimes it can be, but many things take a bit more coddling to get the germination process started. I recommend for your first time to get starter plants from your local nursery (Rainbow Gardens and Shades of Green are my favorites). This will give you a higher chance of success when you’re a beginner.

Fall/Winter

KALE (WHEN THE WEATHER COOLS)	SPINACH (WHEN THE WEATHER COOLS)
TOMATOES (UNTIL 1ST FREEZE)	ARUGULA (WHEN THE WEATHER COOLS)
CARROTS	SWISS CHARD
EGGPLANT	STRAWBERRIES
BEETS	HERBS
PEPPERS (BELL & HOT PEPPERS)	PUMPKIN (NEED TO GET THEM IN THE GROUND BY JULY/AUGUST TO HAVE THEM BY OCTOBER-IT TAKES 100 DAYS TO MAKE A PUMPKIN!
BROCCOLI	CAULIFLOWER
BRUSSEL SPROUTS	CABBAGE
CUCUMBERS	GREEN BEANS
SNOW PEAS (WHEN THE WEATHER COOLS)	POTATOES

Spring/Summer

CANTELOUPE	WATERMELON
PUMPKIN	CORN
PEPPERS (BELL & HOT PEPPERS)	TOMATOES
EGGPLANT	STRAWBERRIES
SQUASH-ALL VARIETIES (YELLOW, ZUCCHINI, ACORN, SPAGHETTI)	CUCUMBERS
POTATOES	

Light and heat considerations-Keep in mind that although the end of August/beginning of September is “technically” fall, here in San Antonio, that might mean it’s still in the upper 90’s or over 100. Fall plants don’t really like that much heat, so if you’re going to get your fall garden started, you might want to consider keeping your plants in large containers with partial sun to full shade until the weather chills out a bit. The leafy greens do best in temps between 32-75. They can still survive in hotter temps, but only if they have shade during the hottest parts of the day. Many fall plants will “bolt” when it gets hot. That means they shoot up and try to flower, signaling the end of their growing time. Make sure to water a lot while the fall season is getting into full swing.

How much space do I really need? Large plants, viners and climbers

Whether you are growing in containers or a raised bed, you will need to consider space. What seems like enough space when plants are small, will quickly become cramped, resulting in reduced yield from your plant. Tomatoes in particular are one that can become massive, so spread them out. I might put 2-3 plants in a large bed like the ones we have at the school. Your tomatoes will also need support as they grow. You can start by using veggie tape to tie them to a garden stake. Before too long, you will need to place a tomato cage around them. Don't mess around with those little cages that pose as actual tomato cages...your tomatoes will take those things down to the ground in short order if you do your job right. A real tomato cage will cost about \$40, but you can use them year after year. It's worth the investment (pic below).

Vining plants like squashes, pumpkins and melons will get quite expansive, If you have them in a bed, I would plant them in the corners and allow the vines to flow out of the bed and across the ground. Keep in mind that the vines will spread several feet, so make sure you have the space for them to do their thing! Some plants like to climb! Cucumbers, beans and snow peas are the ones that will need a trellis or a wire fence to get them up and off the ground so they can be successful.



YES-This is a real tomato cage.



NOPE-This is an imposter. It will do nothing to support your tomatoes.



A FRAME TRELLIS- Great for climbing veggies

Potatoes & Root Vegetables

Potatoes need a lot of dirt. You will need to get seeding potatoes (can be found at Tractor Supply seasonally). Cut out the “eyes” of the potato and let them dry out for a day or two. Dig a trench and plant the eyes in the dirt. Once they start to sprout, cover them with a layer of dirt. As they grow continue to cover them with soil. The more soil you cover them with, the more potatoes you will get. One potato plant should yield a whole bag of potatoes!

Thinning Root Veggies- If you grow your root veggies from seed, it’s inevitable that you will need to thin them out a bit as they get bigger. You can simply pull out the smaller of the plants that are close by a neighboring larger plant, or you can transplant them by replanting the seeding you pulled to another area. Thinning is important, otherwise the edible root will never grow large enough to give you a good size plant.

Beets: Before and after thinning



Planting potato eyes



Potato mounds after layering soil multiple times

What about the bugs? Should I use pesticide?

I don't ever recommend using pesticide in your garden. What's harmful to bugs, is not great for humans either. The neat thing about growing your own food is that you know what you did or didn't do to it! Also, many pesticides are harmful to beneficial bugs like our bees, ladybugs and mantises. So what do we do instead? Well, there's some options.

Option 1- Share! Haha, no really...a little hole in a leaf here or there is not the end of the world. Trim off the damaged part of the leaf and eat the good part. Not too big of a deal.

Option 2- Soapy water! Believe it or not, a lot of bugs really don't like being doused with a good spray of Dawn and water. This is particularly effective on those nasty aphids! The trick is to examine your leaves. Check the undersides of the leaves daily and give them a good spraying when you notice bugs are present. Look out for eggs that may belong to other detrimental bugs. If you notice them, remove them and treat the plant. Monterey BT liquid and Neem oil are both good, natural and safe sprays that you can use to treat for caterpillars and bad bugs, but diligence in checking your plants and removing bugs as you see them is very important. Diatomaceous Earth (DE) is also a natural substance that you can use. It will harm even beneficial bugs, so it's best to not use it a lot. I do use it for fire ants in the garden so I don't have to put poison down near the vegetables. It works like a charm!

Option 3- Companion planting- This one will take a little more studying on your part as I am not the expert myself. The idea is that when you plant a variety of plants together, the bugs that like one plant will end up being attacked by the bug that's attracted to the neighboring plant, so the bugs actually scare each other off essentially. You might want to read up on this a bit to learn more, but this is a technique that many organic gardeners use for pest control.

Beneficial Nematodes! What are they?

Nematodes are microscopic organisms that love to eat bad bugs that live in and under the soil such as grubs. You can even use them in your grass to kill fleas! You will need to keep them in the refrigerator until you're ready to use them. To disperse, you will need to swish the sponge they come on in water and spray or water them into the soil. (if you use a sprayer, you need to make sure there is not a screen on the nozzle, because the screen will trap them and prevent them from going through the sprayer. It's best to disperse in the evening hours.

Should I fertilize and with what?

Yes, fertilization is a must! Composting at home is always a great option if you want to get serious. If gardening is enough of an endeavor for right now, that's ok too! I recommend "Hasta Gro" liquid fertilizer. This is great for flowers and houseplants also! This is what I would recommend using every week or every other week. You will want to add more composted manure at the end of each growing season before you replant again. A helpful trick when growing tomatoes is to use rock phosphate and epsom salt. Put a good handful of each in the hole right before you put your plant in. This will help fertilize your plant and increase your yield. Epsom salts can be spread at the base of any flowering plant and will help produce more flowers, which in turn creates more fruit!

I hope this information has been helpful for you. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have further questions. I'm not a guru by any means, but I'm happy to help any way I can!

Happy Gardening!

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