



Get Started Gardening

A Mini eBook by Teri Page of Homestead Honey

The magic of gardening is that you can start with a patch of soil or a container, add a tiny seed, sunshine, and some water. Weeks later you come away with a bounty of fresh, delicious food that was grown right in your backyard.

Gardening is rewarding, inspiring, and meaningful. Beyond that, gardening can save you money, and is the ultimate in local food! This mini eBook will get you started by sharing some of the most important considerations for starting a garden, or improving your current one!

The First Step

If you're interested in planting a garden this fall, or preparing to grow one next spring, my first recommendation is to head to the library. Even the smallest library will likely have a nice selection of books about gardening, and you can tailor your reading to your specific needs and interests.



How Does Your Garden Grow?

Every garden needs, at minimum, the four S's - Sun, Seeds, Soil, Space - and one W - water.

Sun

Most food plants prefer full sun to partial sun, meaning that for much of the day, they are fully exposed to sunlight. In the heat of the summer, a few cool weather plants such as lettuce will do well with partial shade, but in general, plants need a lot of sunlight to grow vigorously.

Seeds

Great seeds make great plants. Seeds carry the genetic material of the plant, and all of the energy the plant needs to germinate, or begin to grow. Seeds can be viable for a year, or for many years. To test for seed viability, you can use this simple test (<http://homestead-honey.com/2014/01/29/a-simple-seed-viability-test/>).

Some of my favorite seed companies are committed to using non-Genetically Modified seeds (non-GMO). They also carry many open pollinated seeds, a wide variety of heirloom seeds, in addition to some hybrid favorites.

Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company: <http://rareseeds.com/>

High Mowing Seeds: <http://www.highmowingseeds.com/>

Territorial Seed Company: www.territorialseed.com/

Johnny's (Organic selection): <http://www.johnnyseeds.com/t-organic.aspx>

Fedco: <http://www.fedcoseeds.com/>

Seed Savers Exchange: www.seedsavers.org/

Seed savers can also trade and swap heirloom seeds online at

<http://www.heirloomseedswap.com/>



Soil

Building soil might be the most important aspect of gardening, as organic-rich soil will provide fertilization for plants growth, will hold moisture, and will help prevent disease and pests. My favorite reference for building soil is an

eBook from my friend Susan Vinskofski of the blog, Learning and Yearning (<http://learningandyearning.com/building.your.soil>)

Composting

In a nutshell, great soil can be nurtured with the addition of organic materials such as manure and compost. Composting your food scraps is an easy activity that can even be done in a small space, such as under a sink via vermi-composting (composting with worms)

(<http://montanahomesteader.com/learning-vermicomposting/>).

If you have space in your garden or backyard, consider adding a compost pile or bin. The simplest set-up is literally a pile in which you layer “green” material such as food scraps, garden waste, or grass clippings with “brown” material such as fallen leaves or straw. Over time, the pile will decompose into a rich organic matter that will greatly boost your garden’s growth!



I have written a few blog posts about building great soil. You can find them here:

Create an Instant Garden with Sheet Mulching: <http://homestead-honey.com/2013/04/02/create-an-instant-garden-with-sheet-mulching/>

Building Soil with Lasagna Gardening: <http://homestead-honey.com/2014/04/07/building-soil-with-lasagna-gardening/>

To Till or not to Till a Garden:

<http://homestead-honey.com/2014/05/22/till-till/>



Space

How large or how small a garden you can grow is largely determined by available space. On a sprawling homestead, it is not unusual to have a garden of a thousand square feet or more! But you can add to your family's local food supply even with a few large pots on a front porch or balcony.

Consider planting Swiss chard, kale, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, or herbs in a large pot, or even lettuce in your gutter!

(<http://www.greeneggsandgoats.com/2013/05/get-your-mind-in-gutter-and-your.html>)

Vegetables in containers look great, and are easy to access - right out your front door. Check out this container gardening guide for information about drainage, fertilization, and watering:

<http://www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow/container-gardening>

Even a backyard garden might need some space-saving tricks. Consider using trellises to create vertical interest, save space, and keep plants off the ground: <http://homestead-honey.com/2013/08/07/in-the-garden-trellises/>

Water

Each plant has different water requirements, but I have found that my gardens thrive when they get at least 1-2" of water one time each week. That might come from a heavy rain, or a deep watering. I enjoy hand-watering my garden because it gives me an opportunity to check in with each plant, but gardens also employ drip irrigation and sprinklers for easy watering.

You can minimize the amount of watering that your garden requires by mulching your garden heavily with straw, grass clippings, wood chips, or other organic materials.



What to Plant and When to Plant It?

What to Plant?

Choosing vegetable, herb, or flower varieties is truly complex. You must consider factors such as disease and pest resistance, days to maturity, flavor, growing habit, and more.

Because plant recommendations can vary so much from region to region, my suggestion for beginning gardeners would be to take the recommendations of the Extension Service or an experienced local gardener or farmer. Once you are comfortable with the basics of growing, branch out and try different varieties! Some of my favorite sources for non-GMO seeds include High Mowing Seeds, in VT (<http://www.highmowingseeds.com/>) and Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, in MO (<http://www.rareseeds.com/>).

When to Plant?

When to plant is largely reliant on where you live, so let's first dive into plant hardiness and growing zones and first and last frost dates.

Plant Hardiness and Growing Zone

Gardeners and farmers rely on information such as first and last expected frost date, and plant hardiness zone to know when to plant crops. Planting too early or too late in the season may not yield a fruitful harvest, and cold may kill plants entirely.

The Plant Hardiness Zone Map is a useful tool for knowing which growing zone you are in. This tool, provided by the USDA, groups growing regions with the same approximate climate into "zones". So, for instance, in Northeast Missouri, I am in Zone 5b. So is Southern New Hampshire, Northern Illinois, and Western Massachusetts. We share similar four season climates with cold winters, wet springs, hot and humid summers, and crisp falls.

Lower number zones are colder regions, and higher number zones are

warmer areas. For instance, parts of Northern Alaska are in Zone 1, and much of Hawaii is located in Zone 12.

You can find your Plant Hardiness Zone here:

<http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/Default.aspx>

Simply plug in your zip code and it will pull up your zone!

First and Last Frost Date

Finding your last frost date in the spring, and the first frost date for the fall is another very useful tool. There are many places to find this information, but we like to use the Old Farmer's Almanac online tool (<http://www.almanac.com/content/frost-chart-united-states/>). Simply plug in your zip code and it will give you your first and last frost dates (within a 50% probability), and the length of your growing season.

In Teri's area, the last expected frost in spring is around April 19th, the first frost date in the fall is around October 11th, giving me a growing season of 174 days.

If we plug in data for the Adirondack Mountains, where Tatiana lives, we learn that her last spring frost is not until June 1st, her first frost is expected around September 14th and that her growing season is only 104 days! That is a short season, and means that many warm season crops such as eggplants and melons will not ripen without season extenders like greenhouses.

When Should I Start my Garden?

My preferred resource for this information is your State or Local Extension office. Extension offices offer a wealth of information about planting schedules, common pests and diseases, varieties that are suited to your region, and much, much more! To find your Extension office, simply do a web search for "Your State Extension Service."

I like to print out the Vegetable Planting Calendar that the University of

Missouri Extension Service offers (<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/g6201>), and then use this document to help me plan out my planting season.

Some gardeners like to create their own spreadsheets to help organize their planting season.

A quick and easy-to-follow online resource is this planting schedule at The Vegetable Garden: <http://www.thevegetablegarden.info/planting-schedules>

Follow their chart for the optimal times to plant both cool season and warm season vegetables.



Garden Planning

Taking into account where you will grow plants, when your growing season is, and what you'd like to plant, now it's time to make a plan! This can be a very loose plan, as in "I want to grow lettuce and tomatoes," or it can be more detailed, with spreadsheets and successional growing plans.

The tighter your garden space, and the more you'd like to grow, the more organized you need to be. For example, I plant a spring, summer, and fall garden in the same space so I need to think ahead to which plants will be growing at which times. When pockets open up in the garden, I'm ready to plant the next round of crops.

Mother Earth News has some helpful garden planning resources, including a "Crop at a Glance" series and a "Garden Know-How" series.

(<http://www.motherearthnews.com/organic-gardening/garden-planning-zm0z13djzmar.aspx#axzz35sENvih8>)

I also enjoy checking out Pinterest and [Hometalk](#) for planning ideas and timelines.

And of course, there are hundreds of gardening blogs that can provide huge amounts of inspiration and information. My suggestion is to find a garden writer who is growing in the same zone as you!

Happy Gardening!

Teri