

From Yard to Table

You don't need to be a full-time farmer to grow vegetables in your backyard. We asked the experts to dig up their best advice for beginners.

BY DALEY QUINN



Worried you won't have enough sunlight in your yard for a veggie garden? Stick to leafy greens, which require only four to six hours of sunshine daily.

location, location, location

When deciding where to set up your vegetable garden, pick a spot that gets six to eight hours of sunlight daily and ideally is near a water source. This saves you from lugging a watering can back and forth. "Bonus points if the area is either visible to you (say, outside your kitchen window) or somewhere you frequent, like a spot where you sip your morning coffee," says Emily Murphy, expert gardener and author of *Grow What You Love*. This helps avoid an out of sight, out of mind situation.

timing is everything

While spring is generally the best season to begin planting, Kevin Espiritu, blogger at EpicGardening.com, suggests checking your location on the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map (planthardiness.ars.usda.gov). "Enter your zip code in the search bar to learn which zone, such as 9a or 3b, you're in," says Espiritu. Get first and last frost dates and learn which vegetables thrive in your area by doing a Google search using that number/letter combo and the words "vegetable gardening."



**TOP FIVE EASIEST
VEGGIES TO GROW**



1

Tomatoes



2

Leafy Greens



3

Zucchini



4

Peppers



5

Cucumbers

get the dirt on dirt

Without nutrient-rich soil, your vegetables are going to struggle. First-timers should plant in bagged soil (labeled “garden soil” or “vegetable soil”), suggests Robin Vice, garden expert at Lowe’s. If you want to try growing in the ground, purchase an at-home test kit to determine the soil’s pH level. The kit will tell you whether your soil is too acidic (add agricultural limestone) or not acidic enough (add sulfur).



take the high ground

Expert consensus is that raised beds are the way to grow when starting a veggie garden. “They allow you to be in control of what’s in your soil and let you choose how shallow or deep you’d like it to be,” says Danny Watson, home and garden expert at The Home Depot. “If you have limited space, opt for a container or large pot on your patio or deck,” says Vice. “You can easily move it around to follow the sun.”





creature feature

A daily inspection for signs of insects or critters is key. “Look for leaves that have been chewed on, and you’ll most likely find an insect on the underside,” says Watson. Take your hose and spray the bugs off the plant. Once they’re on the ground, they’ll lack the energy to get back to the plant. If you’re battling rabbits, squirrels or raccoons, surround your raised beds with chicken wire. Once you’ve figured out what types of veggies you’ll be growing, Vice suggests Googling which insects and animals are specifically attracted to those plants and what they look like. That way you’ll have a sense of what to keep an eye out for.



feed your food

When it comes to fertilizers, Megan Cain, author of *Smart Start Garden Planner*, always chooses organic over synthetic or chemical. Organic fertilizers release the nutrients plants need at a slower pace over the season and help build soil health over the long term. While most experts suggest watering daily or every other day, it’s still important to monitor plants closely. “Dig about 1 to 2 inches into the soil with your finger and feel for how dry it is,” says Espiritu. “The deeper the dryness, the more water it’ll need.” Do this weekly to gauge whether you’re watering too much or too little. You want soil to be moist, not muddy.

← pick seedlings over seeds

Seedlings (young plants) are a great way to build gardening confidence. “They cost a little extra, but you’re buying yourself some growing time and avoiding mistakes you might make with seeds,” says Espiritu. Before purchasing, check that each seedling is in its own cell. “It’s more difficult to tease the seedlings apart and plant them into your garden if they’re all grown together in one tray,” says Murphy.