

Gardening for health - starting out

Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits and can be very enjoyable. It's an activity that everyone can enjoy. People with disabilities, seniors and children can find it especially rewarding to spend time in the garden tending plants and growing their own food. With some planning and thought, you can create an interesting, productive and pleasant space that can be used as an edible garden.

An edible garden does not have to be large. Your garden can start small with a few pots and containers or even just a window box with a few suitable cuttings or herbs.

Benefits of growing an edible garden

Research shows that gardening is a healthy activity. Working in the garden provides benefits that include:

- **Enjoyment** – from the physical activity
- **Exercise** – physical activity improves your endurance, strength, mobility and flexibility
- **Relaxation** – helps you relax and reduce stress levels
- **Fresh food** – provides you and your family with a healthy source of inexpensive fresh food.
- **Appreciation of food growing** – provides an appreciation of foods and their origin.

Grow things you can eat

An edible garden is a garden that contains flowers, herbs, seeds, berries and plants that you can eat. Flowers and herbs can be used in salads, add flavour to cooked dishes, be made into teas or used as a garnish. Plants, vegetables and fruits can be eaten raw or cooked. Examples of flowers, herbs and plants that are suitable for an edible garden include:

- **Flowers** – borage, carnation, chamomile, chrysanthemum, fuchsia, geranium, hibiscus, hollyhock, honeysuckle, impatiens, lavender, lemon blossom, lilac, marigold, nasturtium, pansy, rose, salvia and violet.
- **Herbs** – rosemary, basil, chives, sage, mint, oregano, parsley and thyme.
- **Seeds and berries** – blueberries, mulberries, pumpkin and sunflower seeds.
- **Vegetables** – lettuce, tomatoes, silverbeet, corn, capsicum and beans.
- **Fruits** – rhubarb (stems are edible, but the leaves are poisonous), kiwi fruit, strawberries and passion fruit.
- **Plants and trees** – all sorts of fruit trees including lemons, apricots and apples. Even the leaves from bay trees are great for use in stews and casseroles.

Everything you pick to eat should be washed carefully. Only eat flowers in salads if they are organically grown and free of pesticides and other garden sprays. Be aware that some flowers, seeds and leaves can be toxic.

An edible garden can be any size

An edible garden can be started in a small area. Courtyards, balconies, porches and very small gardens are all suitable sites. If you don't need a raised garden bed, you can create a space directly into the soil in your garden.

The area selected should be flat and receive reasonable amounts of sunlight and some shelter from the wind. There should be a garden tap nearby so you can water plants easily, but make sure the walking surface will not become slippery. A shed, cupboard and bench are useful to store materials and to pot-up plants.

Suitable containers

There are a variety of containers that can be adapted to grow plants in. These include:

- Old wheelbarrows or prams (with hood removed or folded down for maximum sunlight) that can be moved about
- Old bathtubs or laundry tubs with holes for drainage
- Old car tyres that can be stacked on top of each other at different heights
- Plastic and terracotta pots on castors that can be moved around easily
- Large pots, polystyrene boxes, barrels, large terracotta pipes and recycled containers
- Purpose-built raised garden beds that can be made to suit your needs.

Gardening tips

Hints that will help you to create a successful edible garden include:

- If you have a north-facing wall, consider growing suitable plants or vines up the wall in containers.
- Remove weeds regularly as they rob the soil of valuable nutrients.
- Compost most garden materials (leave out the problem weeds) and all vegetables and fruit scraps from the kitchen. Make sure scraps are shredded well before composting.
- Use organic fertilisers and mulch to conserve water.
- Rotate crops regularly (every season or at least every year) to ensure that soil retains nutrients and the risk of diseases is reduced.
- Use non-chemical remedies like garlic, chilli spray or milk to ward off pests.

Protect yourself when you're gardening

When you're gardening outdoors, there are a few safety tips that you should follow. These include:

- Wear sunscreen and protective clothing including a hat, correct footwear and gloves.
- Warm up, bend and stretch before you start.
- Take regular breaks and don't forget to stretch and change position often.
- Bend at the knees and don't strain when lifting heavy objects.
- Drink plenty of water especially in warm weather.
- Store garden tools and equipment safely.
- Observe safety instructions when using potting mix, any sprays or fertilizers.

Where to get help

- Community or local garden groups
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria Tel. (03) 9836 1128
- Cultivating Community Tel. (03) 9429 3084
- Department of Health Victoria, Prevention and Population Health.

Things to remember

- Gardening is a healthy activity that can be enjoyed by people of all ages.
- An edible garden can be started in a very small area or in containers or pots.
- Make sure your plants are non-toxic varieties and are edible.
- Don't use chemical sprays or fertilisers in your edible garden.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Horticultural Therapy Association Vic.

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