
Gardening - planning an edible garden

Summary

- 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.
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Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits, and can be enjoyed by everyone. People with disabilities, older people 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 is a garden that contains flowers, herbs, seeds, berries and plants that you can eat. It 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 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 understanding of foods and their origin.

Designing an edible garden

When planning your edible garden, some of the key considerations include:

- how much space you have – remember, an edible garden can be as small as one plant in a pot
- the best place – a sunny position with easy access to water will work well, but many edible plants will also grow well in partial shade
- the nature of your soil – well-draining soil with plenty of organic matter is ideal
- what you would like to grow and eat
- who the garden is for and how they will access it – consider how much room may be required for wheelchair access and whether you will need to construct raised beds
- what you hope to achieve in the garden – you might need space for group activities or meal preparation
- what infrastructure you might like to include – a shed, cupboard or potting bench can be useful for storing materials and potting up plants.

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 for easy access, you can plant directly into the ground.

Suitable containers for an edible garden

There is a variety of containers that can be adapted for growing plants. These include:

- old wheelbarrows – these are great because they can be moved about
- old bathtubs or laundry tubs with holes for drainage
- plastic and terracotta pots – if these are on castors they can be moved around easily
- large pots, barrels, large terracotta pipes and recycled containers
- raised garden beds, which can be purpose-built to suit your needs.

Where to position an edible garden

The area selected for your edible garden 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. Make sure the walking surface will not become slippery.

The best soil for an edible garden

The ideal soil for growing edible crops is:

- free-draining, but still able to retain moisture and nutrients
- rich in organic matter
- neutral pH to slightly acidic (pH 6 to 7)
- rich in soil life, such as earthworms.

To determine if your soil is free draining, dig a few small holes about 60 cm deep in different positions around your garden. Fill them with water and let it drain away, then refill it and time how long it takes to drain. The result will tell you:

- If the rate of drainage is less than 2.5 cm (one inch) per hour, then you have poorly draining soil. This is a common feature of clay soils, and can be improved by adding and digging in gypsum and compost. Alternatively, you may wish to plant plants that are suited to a waterlogged environment.
- A rate of 2.5 to 15 cm (one to six inches) per hour indicates good drainage. You should be able to grow most edible crops well.
- A drainage rate of faster than 15 cm (six inches) per hour is excessive, and is a common characteristic of sandy soils. Fast-draining soils can be improved by digging in plenty of organic matter such as compost and manure. Alternatively, you may wish to plant drought-tolerant plants, such as local Australian natives.

You can use a pH kit to determine the pH (acidity or alkalinity) of your soil. These are available from plant nurseries and hardware stores.

An ideal soil pH for your edible garden is neutral to slightly acidic (pH 6 to 7). An acid soil can be adjusted by digging in calcium in the form of dolomite or lime. Alkaline soils are harder to correct, but may improve over time with the addition of sulphur and compost.

Planning what to plant in your edible garden

When planning what to plant in your edible garden, things to think about include:

- what your favourite fruits, vegetables, herbs and other edible plants are – if you plant what you love to eat then you will be enthusiastic about your gardening project
- sensory appeal – grow plants you like to see, smell or touch
- which plants you need a small amount of, often – herbs are a good example
- which edible plants are rarely found in the shops – perhaps there is a variety of tomato you can't buy at the

supermarket

- the climate where you live – consider which plants are best suited to the local climate
- seasonality – consider which plants will grow best at the time of year when you are planting. Seed packets or labels on seedlings will give you an idea, or talk to staff at your local plant nursery.

Flowers and herbs can be used in salads, can add flavour to cooked dishes, and can be made into teas or used as a garnish. Vegetables, fruits and many plants 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 passionfruit
- 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.

Tips for growing an edible garden

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, and will compete with your crops.
- Compost most garden materials (leave out the problem weeds), and all vegetable and fruit scraps from the kitchen. Make sure scraps are shredded well before composting.
- Use organic fertilisers.
- Mulch to conserve water.
- Rotate crops regularly (every season or at least every year) to make sure that the soil retains nutrients and the risk of diseases is reduced.
- Use non-chemical remedies such as garlic and chilli spray or milk to ward off pests.

Where to get help

- Community or local garden groups
- **Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria** Tel. (03) 9836 1128
- **Cultivating Community** Tel. (03) 9429 3084

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