Growing your own fruit and vegetables is a fun and rewarding way to use your garden. Nothing compares to the taste of homegrown fruit plucked from the tree, or crunchy vegetables hauled from the soil.

But getting started can feel daunting. So here is my handy beginner’s guide to growing your own fresh fruit, veg and herbs. It contains everything you need to know, plus my top 10 tips for growing success!

P.S. I have tons more resources on my website to help you get growing. Click here to see them!
Q: Can I grow veg in my small garden?

Short answer: Yes! Fruit, vegetables and herbs can fit into any size garden as long as you have a sunny spot. You don’t need a lot of space and you can also grow crops in pots and containers!

Even small gardens should have space for a little veg plot. I would recommend making separate beds because they are easy to manage and weed. Keep the beds narrow and the rows short too.

But if you’re really, really short of space you can add vegetable and fruit plants into flower borders.

This is known as potager, a type of French kitchen garden where edible and ornamental plants are mixed together. It is a little less productive but a great choice for smaller gardens where space is limited.
Read my post on creating a potager garden.

Growing crops in containers

Many vegetables will happily grow in containers on the patio or balcony. Make sure to choose large containers like wooden planters and half barrels.

Look for large open pots for leafy veg like salads, and deep pots for underground veg like carrots and potatoes. You can grow tomatoes and tender veg directly in growbags too.

Top 5 veg for pots

- Salad leaves
- Radishes
- Chillies
- Beetroot
- Tomatoes

Top 5 fruit for pots

- Strawberries
- Blueberries
- Raspberries
- Apples
- Cherries

Read my post on growing the 12 easiest veg in containers with growing tips.
Top 10 tips for success!

Here are my top 10 tips to make sure your new fruit and veg growing adventure is a success.

1. Grow fruit and vegetables that you and your family love to eat.

2. Choose an open, sunny spot for your veg plot.

3. Check your soil type and use containers or raised beds if needed.

4. Always prepare the soil well – remove weeds and stones and dig it over to loosen it.

5. Improve the soil by digging in compost or leaf mould. Better still – make your own compost!

6. Never sow too early – wait until the soil is warmed up.

7. Plant fast-growing varieties like salads in containers for a speedy harvest.

8. Stagger your plants for a long harvest by sowing a few seeds every two weeks rather than all at once.

9. Keep everything well-watered, especially during hot and dry spells.

10. Keep a diary! Note down which varieties you planted and the dates so you can look back at the end of the year and plan any changes.
How to choose what to grow

The first rule of growing your own is to grow things you will actually eat! Write a list of your favourite fruit, veg and herbs. It’s probably a long list. So cut it down to something manageable by crossing off:

- Anything that doesn’t suit your soil type
- Anything that needs lots of space if you have a small plot
- Anything too tender to grow in your region
- Anything you can buy really cheaply – no sense in using valuable space to grow staples

For example, carrots need deep, rich soil to grow well. So if you have shallow sandy soil, cross them off your list and look to surface crops like beetroot instead.

The best varieties for beginners

**Top 10 easy veg**
- Salad leaves
- Peas
- Radishes
- Onions
- Potatoes
- Beetroot
- Beans
- Tomatoes
- Lettuce
- Chillies

**Top 5 easy fruit**
- Apples
- Strawberries
- Pears
- Rhubarb
- Raspberries

**Top 5 easy herbs**
- Sage
- Rosemary
- Chives
- Oregano
- Mint

Further reading and planting advice:
- [Ten vegetables for beginners](#)
- [The best herbs for beginners](#)
How to prepare the site and soil

Good crops need good soil. Most fruit and vegetables like soil that is rich, moist and well-drained, with neutral acidity.

There are some exceptions, including blueberries which need acidic soil. These are best grown in containers filled with ericaceous (acidic) compost.

But for the majority of crops, you simply need balanced, good quality soil.

Here’s my step-by-step guide to preparing soil for cultivating crops (PDF).

Finding out your soil type

Do you know what type of soil you have? Testing it is really easy – here’s a handy flowchart.

Please note that this test is intended as a basic guide to the most common soil types. Some soils may be slightly sandy or heavy clay, and there are other types too.

For more detailed information please read my Expert Gardening Guide to Soil (PDF).

Dip a handful of soil in water and try and roll it.
Does it form a sausage?

NO

SANDY

This is a good, light soil that drains easily, but it can lose its nutrients too quickly and dry out.
Most plants grow fine in this soil, but may need mulch to help keep nutrients and moisture in.

YES

CLAY

This soil holds onto moisture well, but it’s very compact. This means it can get waterlogged, causing roots to rot. In summer it dries out completely and turns solid, meaning roots struggle to grow deeply.
You will need to break it up with soil improvers like compost.

NO

LOAM

This is the best type because it is loose but rich in nutrients. It will still need extra help from organic matter though.
How to improve your soil

Most soils can be improved with the addition of organic matter.

But if you have very heavy clay soil that is prone to waterlogging, it might be better to grow fruit and veg plants in containers or make raised beds.

Digging in plenty of organic matter will improve the structure of your soil and add nutrients for the plants.

Dig compost or leaf mould into the top few inches of the soil a couple of weeks before planting your vegetables.

Some veg growers also add well-rotted manure in the autumn – ask a local farmer to deliver some for you.

And boost the soil’s nutrient content by scattering some general-purpose compost over the surface and raking it in just before planting.

You should start making your own compost if you don’t already! It’s so easy and keeps a constant (and free) supply of extra nutrients to boost your plants. Here’s my step-by-step guide (PDF).

Mulching the soil

You can also apply the organic matter over the surface of the soil around established plants as a mulch.

This allows the nutrients to feed down into the soil, as well as helping to retain moisture and stop weeds growing.

Read my blog post about mulch here.
Veg: Sowing hardy seeds outdoors

The cheapest way to grow vegetables is to sow them from seed.

Hardy plants, meaning those that can withstand frost and snow, should be sown directly in the ground where they are to grow.

Most vegetables fall under this category.

Leave the sowing until the soil has warmed up in spring. As a general indicator, wait until the grass is growing well again.

Follow the sowing instructions on the packet to the letter, especially the spacing information. If you put plants too close together, they will produce smaller crops.

How to sow in drills (straight lines)

- Mark a straight line across the soil by pegging a length of string down between two wooden stakes.
- Use the end of a hoe to make a channel in the soil, as deep as the seeds need to be sown.
- Water in the drill to make the soil moist (seeds need this to germinate).
- Sow the seeds according to the packet instructions.
- Use the hoe to push the soil back into the drill and gently press down the surface.
- Mark one end of the row before removing the string.
Beginner’s Guide to Growing Fruit and Veg

Veg: Sowing tender seeds indoors

Tender plants can be damaged by frost, so these are sown indoors first and then planted out into the garden once the seedlings are established.

Follow the instructions on the seed packet and wait until late spring or early summer before moving them out into the garden. Tender plants include tomatoes, aubergines and peppers.

Sow tender seeds into potting compost indoors following the packet spacings. Keep the soil moist but not wet.

How to harden off young plants

Make sure to harden off any plants that are sown indoors! This means acclimatising them to outside conditions before you plant them out into the garden.

Once the seedlings are ready to go into the garden, start moving the pots outside during the day and bringing them back in at night for a week or two. Then you can plant them out in the garden.

Growing veg from plug plants

Many gardeners don’t want the hassle of germinating seeds and buy plug plants instead. These are very young plants that are ready to go straight into the garden.

Plug plants are more expensive to buy than seeds but the hard part is done for you. Be aware that plug plants are available in less varieties than seeds too.

You can always use a mixture of seed-sown and plug plants to keep costs down.
Fruit: Growing soft fruit bushes

Soft fruit bushes like raspberries are generally sold as canes, which need planting during the dormant season between autumn and spring.

Always plant fruit canes as soon as you can after you buy them.

Alternatively you can buy container-grown fruit bushes, which can be planted at any time of year but usually around late spring in time for the fruit to appear.

Strawberries are unusual because they always come as young plants.

Read my guide to growing soft fruit bushes.

Growing fruit trees

Fruit trees like apples and pears should be planted during the dormant season, unless you buy container-grown versions.

If you have a small garden but still want a fruit tree, look for dwarf varieties to grow in containers.

If your neighbours don’t grow fruit trees, consider buying self-fertile fruit trees to guarantee plenty of fruit. Ask your local garden centre or nursery for their recommendations.

Read my guide to growing fruit trees.
Crop rotation basics

Vegetables belong to groups or ‘families’ of plants that are similar to each other. But this means they are susceptible to the same pests and diseases.

If you grow the same crop families in the same spot every year, pests and diseases will build up in the soil.

This is why gardeners practise crop rotation. It simply means moving crops around so you grow different types of plants in any given spot each year.

Q: Do I have to move my crops around?

Yes. Not only does it offer protection from pests and diseases, but it is also makes sure soil doesn’t get depleted.

Some crops are very ‘hungry’ and remove large amounts of nutrients from the soil. If you plant hungry crops in the same spot again they will not grow as well.

For example, brassicas like cabbage are hungry plants. So a common crop rotation technique is to plant them where you grew beans and peas the previous year.

This is because those plants add nutrients like nitrogen to the soil as they grow, making it the ideal spot for growing hungry crops the following year.

Note that crop rotation does not apply to perennial plants that stay in one place year after year, like rhubarb and artichokes. Plant these in a separate bed.

Crops that don’t need to be included in rotation like salads and peppers can be planted wherever there is space.
Crop rotation guide

First divide your vegetables into their families. Then choose a three-year rotation scheme if you want to grow lots of potatoes and brassicas, and a four-year scheme if you want to grow lots of legumes.

- **Brassicas**
  - Cabbage
  - Cauliflower
  - Kale
  - Swede
  - Brussels sprouts

- **Potatoes**
  - Potato
  - Tomato
  (nb. Peppers and aubergines belong here but can be planted anywhere)

- **Onions**
  - Onions
  - Leeks
  - Garlic
  - Shallots

- **Roots**
  - Carrot
  - Beetroot
  - Celery
  - Parsnip
  - Fennel

- **Legumes**
  - Peas
  - Broad beans
  (nb. French and runner beans belong here but can be planted anywhere)

3 year crop rotation

Divide your bed into three sections. Every year, move the crops in one third to the next spot. After three years you will be back at the start.

Year 1: Potatoes, Roots, onions and legumes, Brassicas

Year 2: Roots, onions and legumes, Brassicas, Potatoes

Year 3: Brassicas, Potatoes, Roots, onions and legumes
4 year crop rotation

The traditional four year crop rotation is based on a square bed divided into four parts, but it can also be used across one long bed. Simply move all the crops to the adjacent spot each year.

Potatoes

Brassicas

Legumes

Roots and onions

Time to get growing!

Now you know the basics of growing your own fruit, vegetables and herbs, it's time to get stuck in!

I hope you find your new edible garden thoroughly enjoyable and you get tasty, bountiful harvests.

If you need more help and advice please take a look at my website, which is full of step-by-step growing guides for some of the most popular crops and helpful blogs with seasonal tips.

Enjoy your new hobby!

David Domoney