

## Planning your first edible garden? Here are the steps to follow and common mistakes to avoid

Source: [CBC](#)

As any experienced gardener can attest, successfully planting an edible garden can require more than enthusiasm and a handful of organic, heirloom, non-GMO seed packets. Having the right combination of location, conditions and plants in place can mean a huge difference in yield and overall success.

To guide novice gardeners through their first plantings – whether they're working with a [single pot on a balcony](#), or generously-sized raised beds in a suburban yard – we reached out to two Canadian gardening experts for their best advice when it comes to growing vegetables, herbs and edible flowers. Here are the planning steps to follow, and common mistakes to avoid, if you're hoping for a bumper crop this year.

### Make sure there's enough light

Before you buy any seeds or place an order for garden supplies, start by calculating how much sunlight is available wherever you're hoping to place your plants. You can measure available sunlight by placing something with a little solar panel, such as a solar-powered toy, on a spot for a day and checking on it hourly to determine how much sun the space actually receives, suggests Carson Arthur, a landscape designer, television personality and owner of Carson's Garden + Market. "Then you can look up lists of plants based on how many hours of sunlight you have," says Arthur. "A good general rule of thumb is to go with leafier plants – things like kale, spinach, lettuce – in shadier spots because they [don't need as much] sunlight to grow and produce."

How sunny or shady your garden or balcony space is should really guide your planting decisions. "Any hot crops that you want to grow – peppers, eggplants, tomatoes, squashes, corn – need at least five or six hours of direct sun a day," says Natalie Boustead, Community Gardens Coordinator at Foodshare Toronto. "If you have a space that actually just doesn't have six hours of direct sun, no matter how good a plant parent you are, you're not going to get those crops to yield very much and you'll end up being disappointed." For partial-shade areas, Boustead recommends looking at cold crops, leafy greens, and root vegetables instead.

### Pick the right beds, containers and soil for your space

If you're gardening in an urban area, [raised garden beds](#) could be a good idea. "In a downtown area, it's always tricky to plant in a backyard straight into the ground," says Arthur. "Because you're often competing with roots of trees, with whatever was in the ground before, things that contractors may have put down there." Raised beds, which work well for condos and rooftop gardens as well (just put in a bottom), allow you to control or change the type and quality of the soil your plants will grow in more easily. "Different plants love different types of soil," says Arthur. "You can look up plants based on acidic soil,

alkaline soil, or just regular potting mix. It'll give you a list of plants that do best in those conditions." For example, if you're growing blueberries you may want to add coffee grounds or pine needles to the soil to make it more acidic.

Arthur recommends investing in a blended-mix soil instead of regular topsoil, if you can, for your planters and raised beds. "Topsoil is the top three to five inches of the ground that often has most of the nutrients in it. But when they remove the topsoil from a site they have to let it sit for a little while, and then they can remove it again; the nutrient level goes down each time," he explains. "From a gardening standpoint, you can absolutely use topsoil. But if you want the best success for your plants, go with the blends; your plants will be much happier." Although slightly pricier, the blends incorporate amendments like composted manure or peat moss to offer more nutrients.

Your raised garden beds can be any size you want, but Boustead recommends keeping ergonomics in mind if you're building your own. First of all, the taller the bed is, the less you'll have to bend over to do work in it. And each bed can be as long as you want; but, as a rule of thumb, you'll want to keep the width to about four feet wide. "This ensures that on either side you can reach two feet in, which is our general wingspan, so you're not leaning over too far and hurting your back or hurting your shoulders," says Boustead.

If [container gardening](#) makes more sense for your space, just be sure to use containers that offer sufficient depth and also drainage (meaning that it has one or more holes at the base). "With balcony gardening and container gardening, the depth of your planter really matters in terms of what you want to grow," says Boustead. For larger-scale plants such as tomatoes, squashes, eggplants and peppers, she recommends a planter that's at least two feet deep, both for stability and to give the roots enough space.

Even the colour of your container can affect plant health and productivity. "If you have a container that's black, that's actually really great for your hot crops like peppers and eggplants, because black absorbs the sun and creates more heat for those heat-loving plants," says Boustead. "Whereas if you plant greens or cooler crops in it, that additional heat actually might damage them or lead to bolting, where plants start to send up their flowers or seed shoots earlier than they should."

### **Don't simply plant your favourite veggies**

You want to choose the best plants for your skill level and available time commitment, knowing that it can take a few growing seasons to find the ideal combination of greens for your space. "Most homeowners will not have an amazing successful garden the first time [they] do it," says Arthur. "This is one of those things that you're going to have to try year after year, and stick with it understanding that not everything is going to be successful right from the beginning." But, you'll eventually discover the crops that like your space, that grow well for you, and work with your lifestyle.

For novice gardeners, Arthur recommends starting with leafy greens. "Things like lettuce, spinach, kale are the easiest to grow by far," he says. "As you start getting into vegetables that produce – whether they produce a fruit, an edible flower, or anything where the plant

itself is not what you eat – that's when it starts getting more complicated, because it needs more energy, more food, more water to actually produce that fruit."

Beans, lettuce, radishes and onions are other beginner-friendly crops to consider for your first edible garden. "Beans are really easy, produce quite a bit, and come up really fast, so you can get several rounds of beans in a single year," says Boustead. "They're one of the only things we grow that is a protein, and they grow in a very small space." Lettuce and radishes are also quick and easy to grow; and similarly onions can be harvested at different times over the whole year, whether you start from bulbs or from seed. "A lot of people don't know that a spring onion is actually just a smaller version of a full onion that hasn't grown to its full size yet" says Boustead. "You could pull some out in spring and leave some to grow to their full size."

If you have room for just one plant pot, Arthur recommends growing either beans or tomatoes in it. "Do beans with some cucumbers that can trail over the side of the pot, and the beans can grow upwards; they are happy growing together," he says. "If you want to grow one tomato plant, plant basil around it." (Just keep in mind that tomatoes, while popular, can be a high maintenance crop. "They are really prone to disease and you have to prune them a lot, train them, and stake them," says Boustead.)

### **Read seed packages carefully**

Once you know which crops will likely work best with the available sunlight in your space, and that match with your skill level, it's still important to read the fine print on each seed package before you commit! Make sure your garden or container will offer sufficient space for, and between, your vegetables – you might be able to fit in fewer mature plants than you think. Keep in mind, too, that some plants can grow quite tall and will require trellises or other vertical supports. "Anytime that you see the word pole, like a pole bean or a pole pea, you need to know that those are going to want trellising; they're going to climb," says Boustead.

Depending on the length of the growing season where you live, it might simply be too late in the season to start some plants from seed. "When you're looking at packages of seeds, there's usually a maturity date that shows how many days it takes that plant to grow" says Arthur. "In our area we have 95 days of summer, so anything that takes more than 95 days, the likelihood of being able to grow that plant before we get our first frost of the winter is probably not very high." In that case, you would need to [start those seeds indoors](#) early enough, or consider buying seedlings.

### **Embrace companion planting**

When planning a garden's layout, keep [companion plants](#) in mind to improve yield and productivity. Companion planting lists can be confusing, but Arthur explains that most plants either love tomatoes or beans, but not both. "Those are the two plants that really dictate what you're going to have in your garden," he says. "If you're doing tomatoes, you're not planting any of the bean friends (like cabbages, eggplants, beets, broccoli, or

cauliflower) in that garden." Instead, consider planting onions, garlic, peppers, basil, and herbs nearby.

And it can be helpful to grow pollinator-friendly flowers near crops that need pollination (i.e. tomato, pepper and eggplant), especially if you have a balcony or rooftop garden that might not normally attract bees and other pollinators. "You want to plant flowers that attract pollinators to your space," says Boustead. "Marigolds are a really good option that you'll find in lots of different garden centers. They're very cheap, abundant, and easy to start from seed.

### **Water your garden judiciously**

Arthur suggests investing in a simple rain gauge to help you be consistent with your watering. "It catches the available rainwater and shows you how much water you received," he says. "Generally, in our area [Ontario], plants need three to four inches of water per week. If you get two inches of rain, then you know you should water until the gauge hits three inches and then you're done."

Keep in mind, too, that container gardens tend to dry out a lot faster than regular ground gardens. "Whatever [the plants'] watering needs are, they usually go up when we grow in containers, so we have to water more often," says Boustead. "That might mean watering at least once a day, or two times a day sometimes, whereas in a regular garden, you might water every other day or every three days depending on rain."

Balcony and rooftop gardens should also be watered more frequently. "You get a lot more sun intensity on a rooftop or balcony, so you want to make sure that your vegetable garden has access to water every single day," says Arthur, who suggests self-watering planters as a convenient option for high-rise gardens in particular. "They have a reservoir underneath the actual planter, and it's basically a water storage that the roots can access – all you have to do is fill up the reservoir once a week and you're done."

### **Don't let the critters get to you**

For both urban and rural gardens, critters such as raccoons, deer and rabbits can be a threat. You can avoid planting crops that they enjoy eating, such as tomatoes; or, you can surround these crops with other plants that the pests don't like. "We know that tomatoes grow really well with onions, and if you plant onions around your tomatoes it actually stops the critters because they hate the smell of onions," suggests Arthur. Alternatively, he notes that there are naturally-occurring products available (think: coyote urine) that use the scent of a natural predator to deter animals like raccoons, squirrels and rabbits from your garden.