

HOW TO CULTIVATE A SUCCESSFUL KITCHEN GARDEN

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Kitchen gardens were gaining in popularity pre-pandemic, and the arrival of social distancing guidelines only accelerated their appeal. Beautiful and functional, the produce-yielding plots provide both delicious backyard crops and an enjoyable and satisfying pastime, and experts expect that modern “victory gardens” will continue to pop up well into the future. “I believe it’s more than a passing fad or momentary trend,” says Lisa Mierop of the Montclair, New Jersey-based landscape firm Mierop Design. “It’s unrealistic to think you will feed your family from a suburban kitchen garden, but it is a gesture towards an emotional and spiritual need to reconnect to nature and a collective recognition that things must change.” Here, Mierop and two other landscape and garden experts share tips for first-time home farmers, from advice on selecting the ideal location to essential equipment and more.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT SITE

Keep an eye to the sky. There are many elements that come into play when choosing the location of your garden plot, but none are as important as the amount of sunlight you will get. “Since photosynthesis is required for the growth of a plant, the sunlight is essentially a source of food,” says Diane Panetta, owner of Growing Wild Greenhouse in Boise, Idaho. An average of four to six hours of sunlight is necessary to produce flowering and fruiting plants. Keep in mind that as the season progresses, the sun often changes position in the sky, so you want to choose a location that gets enough sunlight through the entire growing season.

Think inside (and outside) the box. Keeping optimal sunlight in mind, Allen Martinson of Martinson’s Garden Works in Ridgeland, Mississippi, says that any location, as long as it’s level, should work. He also stresses that there are no rules that say your garden has to be in your backyard—you can have a successful (and aesthetically pleasing) garden in your side yard, front, or even in the space between the sidewalk and street—as long as it’s level and you don’t have drainage issues.

Also, keep in mind that you’re not limited to the ground in terms of your garden location; raised beds and even pots can be very productive options. Panetta advises that planting in pots or other containers is a particularly good option for small spaces or areas where your sunlight is limited. “When I lived in a mountain town with a very short growing season, I drilled a few holes in an old wheelbarrow and planted my tomatoes. I was able to wheel them in and out of the barn when nights were supposed to drop colder than they appreciated,” she says.

Decide what you want to grow before committing to a location. According to Panetta, many plants work well together, while others compete for space. Larger plants, like tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, and melons may start out small, but will definitely crowd others if planted too closely. The space required is dependent on the plants you’d like to grow.

Consider irrigation—and your time. Many people assume they will water by hand, but in reality, this is a time-consuming and arduous task when factored over the full length of the growing season (Panetta notes that during the high heat of the summer, garden beds need water at least once a day). Some people have scheduled irrigation systems installed to ensure adequate watering, which is Martinson’s preferred method. Another option to consider is a soaker hose, which is a less expensive/complex system, but distributes water evenly, can be laid out to reach all plants, and ensures roots get water but leaves and flowers stay dry inhibiting disease and rot.

Figure out how to protect your investment. Before planting, Mierop advises considering the critters you have in your area, from deer to moles, voles, and birds. You may not only need a tall fence to keep deer out, but also fencing that extends down into the ground to prevent digging, and overhead coverage to keep birds away from fruit.

Make your garden soil count. As in all types of gardening, dirt matters when building an ideal backyard farm. Martinson tries to replicate the soil found in California and Mexico vegetable farms, which is a gritty, sandy, barky mix, into his beds by using a mix of sand (usually on the bottom third), mushroom compost, black cow manure, and good potting soil. Meanwhile, Panetta advises that depending on where you live, the natural soil might contain high levels of clay, sand, or loam, so she recommends amending (or replacing completely) the soil with a premium garden mix, which many garden centers sell in bulk. Both contend that you want to make sure there is good drainage to prevent roots from rotting and potentially killing the plants.

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR CROPS

Start small. It can be easy to get caught up in your vision for your garden, while the reality can sometimes be overwhelming, Panetta warns. To keep things simple, begin by focusing on a few crops, and try to research the best varieties for your area. Martinson explains that universally successful crops include tomatoes, okra, lettuces, squash, and cucumbers. Kale is also simple to grow, and different varieties will reap a harvest throughout the growing season. Another good rule of thumb: consider what you and your family enjoy eating throughout the growing season and plant that.

Know your growing season. Being aware of your growing season—the average time from last to first frost—is imperative. “If you have a short, 52-day growing season, planting watermelons that average around 70-90 days to mature means they may not ever have the chance to bear fruit before the season ends,” Panetta explains. So be sure to look at the plant’s “days to maturity,” keeping in mind that this can differ for each variety.

Consider cool season crops. We mostly think of peak summer crops when planting, but Panetta notes that there are many that produce well into the fall, and you can do a second round of planting as summer wanes. Some cool season crops include broccoli, onions, peas, kohlrabi, garlic, beans, asparagus, radishes, rhubarb, brussels sprouts, carrots, potatoes, beets, cauliflower, and cabbage.

When in doubt, go with herbs. If you’re not ready to dabble in fruits and vegetables, a successful herb garden is a great place to start. And since herbs grow successfully in pots, you can place a few on your patio and not have to even think about creating a garden plot. Martinson recommends starting with a mix of mint, lemongrass, rosemary, fennel, dill, parsley, lemon and regular thyme, celery, and oregano.

HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR PLANTS

Look for signs of pestilence. “With all things nature, you will encounter pests,” Panetta says. Damaged leaves and droopy plants are the telltale sign you might have an issue. Slugs, aphids, grasshoppers, and a whole army of other insects can do a lot of harm in a short amount of time, so keep watch and quickly take the appropriate measures, such as contacting your garden expert for next steps and methods to ward off invaders.

Go organic if you can. When dealing with produce, it’s always a good idea to have an organic garden. Martinson reports that most local garden centers have an organic section with everything from soil nutrients to pesticides. Additionally, he explains that some pests, like aphids, are relatively easy to deal with without chemicals. “A good stream of water will knock [an aphid] off the leaves,” he shares. “Once they fall off your plant they will die.”

Be sure to mulch. While it may feel like an afterthought, or a purely decorative measure, mulching actually has an important purpose. “Adding mulch will keep weeds down and moisture in, which is important during those super-hot summer days,” Martinson explains. He prefers pine bark mulch, which makes the soil a little more acidic as it breaks down, but advises that anything that covers the ground—even pine straw—is useful.

Make morning watering a part of your daily routine. Every morning, around 9:00 to 10:00 a.m., you should give your plants a deep watering, according to Martinson. The amount will depend on your outdoor temperature, the soil, and your container. You want to strike a balance where the plants get enough water but are not *too* wet. He also adds that it’s important to water only the roots, as disease can develop if the foliage is wet.

Learn to appreciate the satisfaction of weeding. When you have a garden, weeding has to be a natural part of your maintenance routine. “Where there is good soil and moisture, opportunistic weeds will want to grow just as much as your new vegetable plants,” Panetta explains. Learn to identify plants that don’t belong in your garden, and remove them before they become an issue.

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