

How to Grow a Victory Garden of Any Size

If it's spring where you live, the time is now to start planning for your future fruits and vegetables.



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First the raised beds arrived, three narrow boxes lining the edge of my yard. Then came the soil in a big pungent pile, demanding to be shoveled. And last weekend, I brought home trays of delicate little plants that promise a summer of Swiss chard, snap peas, tomatoes and beets.

The last time my family grew fruits and vegetables, I was a child, and I mostly nibbled my father's strawberry patch clean. But this summer I'm growing my family's food.

With the prospect of a long, hot season spent mostly at home, my garden has never looked riper for growing. I am not alone. Garden centers are reporting a surge in business as homeowners look for ways to grow vegetables, in a spirit reminiscent of the Victory Gardens of World War I and World War II. As Americans face deep economic insecurity, coupled with food shortages and long lines at the grocery store, gardening has taken on a new urgency.

"If you are worried about Covid-19 and going to stores, you have a lot of control over your own environment in your own garden," said Janice Parker, principal of Janice Parker Landscape Architects in Greenwich, Conn.

With a little planning, and some good soil, planting a vegetable garden can pass the time and put food on the table. Here's how to get one started.

Finding Supplies

Before you start your gardening project, contact your local garden center to find out if they are open, what supplies they have in stock and what social-distancing measures are in place. Most states have declared garden centers essential services, but there still may be restrictions or shortages of some supplies.

You will most likely need containers, raised beds (or lumber to make your own), fencing materials and, of course, plants, seeds and soil. And if you don't have a good shovel, gardening gloves and hand tools, now is the time to get those items.

Some garden centers are offering delivery or curbside drop-off. Others are practicing social distancing inside the premises. Seeds and other materials can be ordered online, although deliveries may be delayed, and since it's midway through May, time is of the essence.

Join a local gardening group (many can be found on Facebook), and see if anyone in your area is trading seedlings or supplies they do not need. The connections can also help you learn skills from seasoned gardeners. "One of the ways people get access to things when things are in short supply, is they've got a network of friends," said Carol Deppe, a plant breeder and the author of "The Resilient Gardener: Food Production and Self-Reliance in Uncertain Times."

The Tiniest Indoor Garden

You don't need access to the outdoors to garden. If you have a window, you have space to grow a little food, even if it's just a pot of herbs on the windowsill.

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"Even if you don't have a fire escape or a balcony, you can still be growing a tiny garden in your kitchen," said Leah Penniman, the farm manager of Soul Fire Farm in Petersburg, N.Y. and the author of "Farming While Black."

You could grow microgreens on an empty aluminum tray or takeout food container. Punch holes in the bottom, fill it with soil, and densely lay the seeds — kale, collard greens, mustard greens or radishes — on top of the soil. Cover the seeds with a damp paper towel and water them every day, keeping the soil “moist as a sponge,” said Ms. Penniman. Once they sprout, remove the paper towel and in about two weeks, you’ll have microgreens.

A Garden for a Balcony, Rooftop or Fire Escape

Plants like tomatoes, strawberries, lettuce, chard, herbs, eggplant and even potatoes can grow in containers on a balcony, rooftop or fire escape, so long as you choose ones suitable for your region of the country.

You should select small and vertical growing varieties of your favorite vegetables. If you’re planting a rooftop garden, make sure you don’t inadvertently block any drainage pipes or gutters. If you’re using a fire escape, be sure to keep exit routes clear. Place a trellis against a balcony wall and grow vines, such as varieties of cucumbers, squash, peas and pole beans.

“Some vegetables are good for small patios, like Tumbling Tom is grown in a hanging basket,” said Diana Cluff, the plant designer at the Farm at Green Village, a garden center in Green Village, N.J. “It’s a wonderful cherry tomato. It cascades.”

Choose containers with good drainage, in whatever material appeals to your taste — ceramic, wood, plastic or a fabric grow bag. Larger pots will be easier to maintain than smaller ones because the soil will not dry out as quickly, so choose as large a container as possible. Self-watering containers extend the time between watering. Place your containers in a spot with full sun before you fill them with organic potting mix. (Once the pots are filled, they’ll be heavy to move.) Place vines against a wall or railing, to make it easier for the vines to climb.

A Bed in the Garden

Before you make your planting bed, choose a location with at least six hours of full sun. If your garden has good quality soil and is free of toxins, like lead, you can dig directly into the ground, removing any sod, weeds and roots, and replenishing the soil with a mix of compost and potting soil. But get your soil tested before you attempt to grow food in it.

If you’re not up for testing, prepping and tilling, build a raised bed. You will be able to control the soil, the weeds and, if you’re renting your home, take your box with you when you move. You can buy ready-made raised beds at a garden supply company, or build your own with lumber, nails and screws. (I ordered my raised bed from a local craftsman who built three narrow ones to fit my small space.)

Place a layer of landscape fabric beneath your raised bed and then fill the box with soil. Ms. Penniman recommends using a mix of 50 percent topsoil and 50 percent compost. You can buy bags of organic raised bed soil, too. Many municipalities give away compost, so ask yours if any is available. An online soil calculator can help you determine how much soil you need before you shop.

To keep the furry and feathered neighbors from eating your bounty before you do, lay a mesh barrier underneath the bed and build a fence around it. The fence should be tall and sturdy enough to keep deer, rabbits and groundhogs out, but does not need to be a fortress. “People are told to build a much more aggressive fence than they need — ours are five feet high,” said John Carlson, the owner of Homefront Farmers, a Redding, Conn., company that designs, builds and maintains garden beds.

What to Plant

Let your stomach tell you what to plant. If tomatoes are your jam, double down. If you never eat eggplant, it doesn’t deserve a spot in your plot.

“It doesn’t do you any good to plant red radishes and then they sit around because no one in the family likes little red radishes,” Ms. Deppe, the author of “The Tao of Vegetable Gardening,” said. “Grow stuff your family eats.”

Follow the guides on the seed packet or seedling labels to avoid crowding, as your plants will need space to spread out. Be sure to follow your regional planting schedule, so your plants don't end up in the ground too early or too late. An online garden planner can help you plot out your garden. Soul Fire Farm has been offering weekly gardening tutorials on its Facebook page. And your local garden center can tell you the ideal time to put plants in the ground, and can direct you to low maintenance, disease-resistant varieties.

Add a thin layer of mulch on top of your bed to reduce weeds. You can also use a drip irrigation system (it can be hooked up to a garden hose) to make watering easier. Cluster your containers together so they're easy to water at once with a sprayer, and make sure you water consistently so the soil doesn't dry out.

Whatever you do, plant food and flowers that will bring you joy, and will be easy to grow. "The last thing you need this summer is to be disappointed," Ms. Parker, the landscape architect, said. "This is not the summer for disappointment."