



vegetable growing



what is it?

For a while dismissed by many as a quirky hobby for eccentric hippies (think '70s series *The Good Life*), vegetable growing is making a big comeback, with waiting lists at many allotment sites, schools creating veggie plots, celeb chefs buying their own farms and gardening programmes talking of banishing the lawn in favour of food production.

With recent food scandals, health concerns and the rise of media food culture coverage there's also a growing interest in where food comes from, and how seasonal and local it is. You can't get more seasonal, local and sure of your supply chain than producing it yourself.

It wasn't long ago that knowing how to grow your own food was a life-saving skill in the UK. With industrialisation, the 1800s saw much poverty, but the welfare state didn't exist. In 1908 the Smallholdings and Allotments Act was passed, requiring local authorities to make growing space available to those who needed it. These laws were strengthened post-war and now allotment sites are well-protected by legislation. Similar allocations of land for growing have been fairly common around the world, for example the dacha system in Russia, which is still in operation.

Stats vary, but many sources say it's possible to be self-sufficient on 1-2 acres. Most people will be growing on a much smaller, hobby scale though, on an allotment (typically 250 square metres – the size of a tennis court), a back garden, or in containers on a balcony. Whatever you have, it's always possible to grow something of your own and reap the many benefits which go with it.



You can plait onions together and hang them somewhere cool and dry ready for use.



Young brassicas in seed trays in the early spring. They'll be 'pricked out' into pots, then later hardened off and planted out into the garden.

what are the benefits?

- Gives you an excuse to get out in the fresh air.
- Keeps you fit with a workout in the 'green gym'.
- Educates the family in where food comes from.
- Gives survival skills if the worst happens.
- Connects you to nature and the seasons.
- Provides fabulous, health-giving, tasty food.
- Reduces your food bill.
- Reduces stress / increases happy hormones.
- Fewer toxic chemicals in the environment.
- Less pollution due to lower food miles.
- Less packaging waste.
- Will probably make you a bunch of new friends.

Organic veg growing doesn't require synthetic chemicals which harm soil micro-organisms and wildlife. Chemical fertilisers are water soluble, which means that rain leaches them into groundwater or water courses, causing excess algal growth, starving other organisms of oxygen). This water solubility also means they're taken up by plants as they drink, whether they need them or not. They become large, but more watery and tasteless. Finished compost, or well-rotted manure is not water soluble, and plants can take as much of it as they need. The production and distribution of chemical fertilisers involves intrusive mining in China and many African countries such as Morocco – do an online image search for 'phosphate mining' and prepare to be horrified; and what happens when we run out?

Organic gardening makes use of liquid feeds (nettles, comfrey) green manures (clover, mustard) and compost (preferably created on-site), which builds soil structure, stops leaching of nutrients and soil erosion. Composting breaks down kitchen and garden waste into a rich humus which adds fertility to your soil.

Adding organic matter encourages earthworms, which aerate the soil, improving drainage and layer mixing.



what can I do?

Seek out friends or family who grow food, or visit local allotments. Growers love to talk, and you might be able to help out in return for produce and know-how; or you could go WWOOFing (see resources); or, start by reading a few books – but not too much before you give it a go, as there's so much information, it can be bewildering. Start with something easy – onions or potatoes – and just do it, while increasing your knowledge and range. Decide what to grow (what you like to eat). Start a compost heap and borrow / buy garden tools. Car boot sales are an excellent and low-cost source.

If you have a plot that hasn't already been cultivated, there's a lot of interest in no-dig techniques. This largely relies on mulching - covering the soil to exclude light and water, and kill weeds. The covering can be organic, synthetic (like Mypex), or old natural-fibre carpets. You need to wait, but it saves a lot of hard work. It's also thought to be better for the soil, as there's less disturbance to structure and soil fauna. There's also the raised bed approach, where topsoil or compost is put on top of pre-existing grass / weeds and contained in a wooden structure.

A way of planning your planting is to create 4 or 5 distinct beds – potatoes, root crops, greens, beans / peas then possibly resting / fallow – and rotate each year. This is an important principle of organic growing; different crops take different nutrients from different levels, and are attacked by different pests, so a new crop each year means nutrients aren't exhausted and pests can't become established. There are some exceptions with plants that have to stay in the same place (e.g. Jerusalem artichoke or asparagus).



Raised beds suppress weeds, increase temperature and drainage, and reduce the need to bend so far.

Buy organic seeds, and, if possible, open-pollinated or heirloom varieties – plants are pollinated by wind, insects, birds etc. If you allow plants to go to seed, the seeds will be 'true to type' i.e. have the same characteristics as the parent. Commercial hybrid seeds are the result of a cross between two varieties of parent selected for certain traits. These have 'F1' on the packet. They're fine to grow (and in some cases – e.g. sweetcorn - you might have difficulty finding anything else), but if you seed-save, it reduces dependency on corporate seeds. Just do what it says on the packet. Get seedling compost from a garden centre, as it won't contain weeds. Make sure it's peat-free, as you don't want to contribute to destruction of peat-bog habitats. For smaller seeds, use a seed compost. When seedlings have grown and you're 'pricking them out' into individual pots, you can then use your own compost.

There are lots of jobs at different times of the year for each type of plant. Books will give more details, as well as exactly how to grow all sorts of veg – when to sow, plant out, harvest etc. – and what protection they need.

Control pests via rotation; companion planting; spray soapy water to repel aphids, and salty water for cabbage white caterpillars. An organic garden will have healthy soil and disease-resistant plants, with predators to eat pests – ladybirds, hoverflies, centipedes, and of course birds. Installing a pond for frogs will help in the war against slugs.

If you water too lightly, new roots will look upwards for water; deep roots make the plant more resilient in times of drought so make sure you give the soil a good drenching. Many think watering is best done in the evening, to lessen evaporation and so you don't risk droplets acting like a magnifying glass on tender leaves and burning in sunshine; but you do then have a higher slug risk overnight.

resources

- lowimpact.org/vegetable-growing for more information, links & books, including:
- Vera Greutink, *Edible Paradise*
- Charles Dowding, *How to Create a New Vegetable Garden*
- Huw Richards, *Veg in One Bed*
- allotment-garden.org: useful info & advice
- charlesdowding.co.uk: no-dig central
- nsalg.org.uk – National Allotment Society
- wwof.org.uk – volunteering on organic farms

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