



How to Start a Garden – A Step-by-Step Guide to Growing Your Own Food

Prep the Area – find an existing place in your yard, on your balcony or in a sunny window to grow veggies, herbs and/or fruit. If you’re using an existing space in your yard, consider getting a soil test to determine what type of soil you’re working with and what you may need to amend it. Visit the [Chesapeake Master Gardener page](#) for more details. If you’re planning to grow in containers indoors or outdoors, ensure that they are clean and will provide good drainage. Growing food is not just for people with yard space and can easily be done in a windowsill.

Remove Weeds – use gloves and hand tools to pull up weeds up from their roots in any existing gardening areas. Weeds should be thrown out in the trash, not added to your compost, unless you’re confident your compost is getting up to 140 degrees. If not, their seeds will continue to grow and spread and can become a problem when compost is applied in the garden.

Chat at a Safe Distance – working outside can be a nice way to connect with neighbors. It’s important to follow appropriate social distancing guidelines in the time of COVID-19 and keep six or more feet between you and anyone that’s not in your household.

Add Compost and Soil if Needed – starting and maintaining a compost pile at home can be very simple. Successful indoor and outdoor compost bins need three components: equal parts “browns”, carbon-rich materials like dried leaves, shredded paper or twigs and “greens”, nitrogen-rich materials like fruit and veggie scraps, coffee grounds and grass clippings, plus the third component, water. This [EPA guide](#) is a helpful tool to starting an indoor or outdoor compost. Adding compost to your soil will help provide a variety of necessary nutrients and beneficial bacteria to help your plants grow. Compost also helps to retain water in

the soil, cutting down on the amount of added water needed, as well as suppressing weeds. If needed, add the appropriate amount and type of soil to your gardening area.

Mix Compost into Soil – with your hands or tools, mix the compost into the soil, ensuring that the soil is being loosened to about 12 inches down. Once you've evened out the gardening space, consider adding a layer of compost to the top.

Review Plans – spend time before digging in the dirt to determine what you would like to grow. Have an understanding of what grows well in our region and during what time of year by determining what [Plant Hardiness Zone](#) you're in. Choose plants that fit the level of sunlight in your designated area and will thrive where you live. Pick veggies and fruit that your family will enjoy. Once your planting area is prepared, review the plans you've laid out, and ensure there will be appropriate spacing between plants or seeds.

Transplant Locally Grown Plants – plant “starts” that have grown from seed into small plants may be purchased from a local nursery or hardware store. In the time of COVID-19, many stores have online ordering and curbside pickup to minimize contact with others. Gently remove the seedling from its container and loosen the roots before placing into a divot in the soil. Carefully cover the roots and pack down with soil. You may also start your own plants from seed indoors or plant seeds directly into the ground outdoors. For more details, view this [helpful guide](#) from Virginia Tech Extension.

Establish a Watering System –with the heat of our area, proper watering is a key element to having a fruitful garden. Depending on your setup, there may be several techniques to consider: watering regularly with a hose, using soaker hoses with an automatic timer, or using a watering can or spritzer. If possible, attach your hose to a rain barrel and use the rain water.

Secure Plants with Cages – some plants such as peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers will grow tall and wide and will need the support of a cage. Fruits will make the plant very heavy and without proper support, the plant may collapse under its own weight.

Celebrate Your Work and Enjoy the Harvest – stand back and admire your hard

work. Remember to weed the area regularly and ensure that plants are getting the appropriate amount of water. In a few weeks, you'll be able to enjoy the fruits of your labor!

There are many resources online to help guide your own gardening experience. We hope you are inspired to grow your own! Not into growing foods? Check out this [guide to native plants](#) in Southeast Virginia instead.

Check out our [video](#) and watch home garden planting in action!