

# Growing Food: A How-To Guide to Get You Started



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# Gardening Basics

- **Sun:** Plant your garden in a south facing area with good sun exposure. Many vegetables, herbs, and fruit trees require at least six to eight hours of direct sunlight per day. Grow low plants on the south end of your garden and tall plants on the north to prevent plants from shading each other. Sunlight is the most important factor in gardening. You can improve soil and water, but you cannot create more sunlight.
- **Size:** If you're new to gardening, start small so you can learn how much time, effort, and money is required. An 8' x 8' foot garden plot is a good size to start with.
- **Water:** Locate your garden near a water source, such as a rain barrel or outside tap. Different plants have different water requirements, so irrigate as necessary.
- **Soil:** If you have a good site but poor soil, add plenty of compost and organic matter, or consider raised beds or container gardening.
- **Keep It Level:** To avoid uneven water distribution and soil erosion, ensure your garden is level. If your site is sloped, consider shaping it into several flat terraces, like a set of stairs.
- **Wind:** Choose a location that is fairly protected from the wind.
- **Access:** Plants that are farther than an arm's length away (approximately two feet) will be difficult to reach, so add pathways throughout your garden, using wood chips or stepping stones.
- **Plant Placement:** Avoid planting under or near large trees, where shade and large roots will reduce yields and quality. Plant your perennial vegetables and herbs (such as asparagus, rhubarb and chives) in an area where they will not be disturbed.
- **Plant Rotation:** To help prevent pest problems, disease, and nutrient deficiencies, follow a four-year plant rotation cycle, whereby plants of the same family are not planted in the same part of the garden more than once every four years (this is particularly important for potatoes and tomatoes).
- **Tracking:** Every year, keep track of which plants you grow and where, including how well they produce. This information will help you make good choices about what plants to grow in the future.

## Soil

Healthy soil creates healthy food. Healthy soil is loose, crumbly, and teeming with microbes. It has the texture and colour of ground coffee. To maintain a healthy soil ecosystem:

- Add a one to two inch layer (minimum) of compost each year;
- Avoid compacting or walking on your soil;
- Use organic mulches (e.g. wood chips, leaves); and,
- Do not use pesticides or synthetic fertilizers.

Vegetable gardens require six to twelve inches of good quality, well-draining top soil (twelve inches is ideal, as many vegetables are deep rooted). If you do not have this depth of quality soil in your yard, consider raised beds.



## Plant Selection

Consider growing fruit, vegetables, and herbs in your garden:

- There are plenty of fruit trees and shrubs suitable for growing in the prairies, such as cherries, haskaps, Saskatoon berries, apples, and more! Visit [fruit.usask.ca](http://fruit.usask.ca) for details.
- For a list of vegetables that do well in our climate, visit [veg.usask.ca/vegetable-crops](http://veg.usask.ca/vegetable-crops). If you are a first-time gardener, start with easy plants such as spinach, lettuce, beans, and cucumbers.
- Many annual and perennial herbs grow well in the prairies, such oregano, basil, sage, dill, and mint.
- If planting vegetables or herbs by seed, choose plants that reach maturity in 75 days or less. Refer to the seed packet for specific growing instructions, including seed depth and spacing.

## Plant Establishment

- Vegetable gardens in Saskatchewan are typically planted during the last week of May, after the risk of frost has passed. However, many plants can be seeded earlier. Refer to the seed packet for specific growing instructions.
- Vegetables that require a longer growing season (e.g. tomatoes, peppers) can be seeded earlier indoors and then transplanted into the garden. Seedlings (young plants) can also be purchased from local greenhouses and garden centres.
- If transplanting fruit trees or shrubs, plant in early spring or late fall.

### **If transplanting seedlings:**

- Wait until the danger of frost has passed.
- Ensure all of the soil from the pot is covered in the ground after planting.
- If root bound, gently pull the roots apart before planting.
- Protect from the wind and direct sunlight for the first one to two weeks after planting (e.g. use a milk carton with an open top and bottom or 'harden off' before planting).

### **'Hardening Off' Isn't Hard**

- Seedlings are started in a protected indoor environment, so they need to get used to the wind and sun before being planted (also known as "Hardening Off"). Simply set seedlings outside for a few hours each day until they've adapted to the outdoors. Keep them well watered—seedlings dry out fast in our climate!





## Garden Maintenance

- If you over-seed, thinning will be required (especially for root crops like carrots and beets). Gently remove some of the young plants until the recommended spacing is achieved, as shown on the seed packet.
- Water well for the first three weeks after planting. Then water deeply as necessary (e.g. when the soil is dry down to one finger length). Use drip irrigation and rain water if possible.
- To conserve space and improve plant health, encourage vining plants (such as cucumbers, peas, and runner beans) to grow vertically on trellises, fences, or sunflower stalks.
- To help reduce the need for weeding and watering, spread organic mulches, such as dried leaves or straw, around your plants (especially water-loving plants such as tomatoes and cucumbers). You can cut a toilet paper roll down the side and place around the stem of the plant to prevent the mulch from coming into direct contact with the plant's leaves and stems.
- Control weeds by hand pulling or adding mulch so they don't compete with your plants for water and nutrients.
- Avoid the use of pesticides, especially in food-producing gardens.
- If there is a plant you cannot identify that is growing in numerous places in your yard and garden, chances are, it's a weed!



# Troubleshooting

## Harvesting

- Different plants are ready to harvest at different times. Take the time to become familiar with the fruits, vegetables, and herbs in your garden.

## Frost Protection

- Many vegetables are not able to survive in temperatures below 0 degrees Celsius, so when frost threatens in late August to mid-September, cover your plants with blankets or thick plastic while temperatures hover around the freezing point. Saskatchewan typically gets another two or more weeks of good gardening conditions after the first fall frosts.

## Gardening at the U of S

For gardening classes for the beginner through to certification, go to [gardening.usask.ca](http://gardening.usask.ca). Take a class, join a free horticultural tour, or enrol in our Gardening 101 series to walk you through your first year.

## City of Saskatoon

Having a healthy yard and garden benefits you and your community. For tips on water conservation, backyard composting, pesticide reduction, and more, visit [saskatoon.ca/healthyyards](http://saskatoon.ca/healthyyards).

## Questions?

Get free, local gardening advice from the University of Saskatchewan's Gardenline at [gardenline.usask.ca](http://gardenline.usask.ca) year round. During the growing season contact a horticulturist for personalized advice at [gardenline@usask.ca](mailto:gardenline@usask.ca).

Community gardening can be an excellent option for every type of gardener, particularly those with limited garden space. To join an existing community garden, or to start one yourself, visit: [chep.org/en/programs/community-gardening](http://chep.org/en/programs/community-gardening).

Grow a Greener Saskatoon