

5 steps for growing fruitful home gardens



There is something to be said for the taste of a tomato fresh off the vine, warm and sun-kissed. Better still is being able to look out and admire the products of a sprawling garden or a windowsill herb collection. But before the fruits of one's labor can be enjoyed come weeks, even months, of careful planning, planting and cultivating. While it may seem daunting to initiate this type of home project, the process for starting any size of garden follows the same five steps.

Step 1: Location

The first step in starting a garden is to determine where the garden will be planted. There are three main types of gardens: large, in-the-ground gardens (fig. 1), raised bed gardens (fig. 2) and indoor herb gardens (fig. 3) or flower boxes.



Fig. 1

For larger gardens planted directly in the soil, choose a flat, sunny area that isn't prone to wetness or too much unwanted wildlife.



Fig. 2

Raised bed gardens can be more accessible if space is a concern, but they dry out faster than traditional gardens, so it is likely they will require a little more attention.



Fig. 3

Window boxes or personal herb gardens require only a dry and sunny windowsill.

Step 2: Tools

In addition to choosing the right location to begin cultivation, home gardeners need a few nonnegotiable tools. Potted gardens require just a spade, trowel and perhaps a watering can and gloves. But traditional gardens will additionally need a sturdy garden shovel and hoe or a gas-powered tiller to break up the soil along with access to a garden hose or other method of watering.

It is also vital to use the right soil. Different plants require different types of soils, and while in-the-ground gardens might not require store bought soil, they will definitely need to be tilled or turned over in order for the plants to take root. Some natural soils are also proportionally higher in clay, sand or silt, so keep that in mind when choosing both location and plant type.

Step 3: What to plant

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has broken the United States into eleven different hardiness zones. This is basically a qualification for the maximum and minimum temperature that produce planted in each region should be able to withstand. Southwestern Pennsylvania is located in hardiness Zone 6 which means that most traditional flowers, herbs, fruits, and vegetables can be maintained at some point during the late March to October growing season.

Figure 5 gives a few suggestions of common plants that thrive in Hardiness Zone 6 and are easy for novice gardeners to grow.

Fig. 5

Flowers

- If planted in the ground in the right conditions, daylilies are a perennial flower that will spring up year after year. They are great for growing in zone 6.



- Marigolds look beautiful in window boxes. They are annuals, which means that their life cycle is only one season long.



Fruits



- Blueberry bushes (and most other berries) grow well in pots where acidic soil is easy to provide.



- There are so many varieties of tomatoes to choose from, and most can be started from seedlings which makes it easier for beginner gardeners.

Vegetables

- Lettuces grow well in raised beds and in the ground. They are perfect for beginner gardeners as long as they are planted early enough, since they can't tolerate scorching summer heat.



- Cucumbers are a refreshing and prolific crop. They are also very versatile as they are conducive to both off-the-vine consumption and pickling/canning.



Herbs



- Herbs, like the basil, mint and oregano shown above, are perfect for growing in a small (but not too small!) pot near a sunny window. They don't require much attention, can be harvested as needed, and can even be dried and stored for later in the year.

Step 4: Care and maintenance

Once all of the planning and planting has been done, gardening becomes a bit of a waiting game. It takes time and effort to pull weeds, water, fertilize and thin plants, but it takes even more time to wait for a garden to produce. Don't rush this process; give crops the due time and conditions they need to be fruitful.

Step 5: Harvesting

The most rewarding part of gardening is being able to reap the products of all the hard work it took to get there. The ability to share the harvest with friends and family, or even trade for some of their produce, is wonderful. And depending on the size of the garden, some of its produce may be able to be canned, or in the case of herbs, dried, so that it can be enjoyed all year long.

Dos and Don'ts of a bountiful garden

Mrs. Hartley and Juniors Calvin Hrutkay and Holly Tran all have experience with home gardening and offered a few helpful tips and tricks for those wishing to start their own garden.

	Dos	Don'ts
Mrs. Hartley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I rely heavily on composting. Composting allows me to effectively use the animal wastes and hay residue produced by the farm...Gardeners can [also] plant natural pest repellants and complementary plants to discourage pests and encourage growth. [For example,] Marigolds are a perfect pest deterrent in a garden.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Starting with a large garden can make you feel overwhelmed because gardening takes time and effort.” • “The worst mistake in a garden is planting too many plants in one space. Keeping your rows distanced and keeping your plants spaced is very important.”
Kalvin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...you have to make sure you're on top of things and starting out with a good soil base.” • “I believe it's very important to use additives or fertilizers even if it is natural or chemical for better production. The products in the market are safe for plants intended for human consumption...One of the best natural fertilizers you can use is animal manure. It is great for nitrogen and phosphorus.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The biggest mistake you can make is watering or harvesting at the wrong time of day which can cause wilting or plant death.”
Holly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I'd say that the first thing that should be done is to assess the area that you want to start your garden in and then also do a lot of research. By assessing your designated area, it'll give insight to the needs and accommodations that your garden needs, like adjusting what type of plants to grow for the amount of sunlight the area receives, how much rainfall your area receives, the daily weather and climate, etc.” • “... the bare minimum tools you need to start a garden are a gardening trowel, gloves, and a hand rake....While these three tools may not reduce the labor you put into it, they will allow you to start a reasonable garden.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...using <i>too much</i> fertilizer, compost, chemical plant food, and other growth additives can burn your plants. This causes them to wilt, stunt growth, not produce, or die.”

Regardless of the type of garden or method of cultivation, gardening can be a fantastic home project for everyone. It is a uniquely customizable project as it can be as complex or simple as needed and can be designed to fit a variety of lifestyles.

As Tran summarized, “There are many different types of gardens that can be produced based on a person's interests. Mine happens to be an herb garden with a few vegetables because I enjoy that sort of thing, but others may be interested in attracting butterflies and will plant flowers and other plants that attract them. Or others are interested in experimenting with plants... Some just like flowers. And that's okay. Gardens can even be rock and sand gardens like Japanese zen gardens. Having a garden doesn't mean that you have to stick to one type. Gardens take on the form of their creator's interests, which means that they can look and be endless.”