



grow your own

How to Start a

Successful Food Garden in 4 Easy Steps

...plus important resources to keep it going!

growyouroakland



congratulations

...on taking this first step on the incredibly rewarding road to growing your own vegetables!

We're excited that you're joining the ranks of Oakland food gardeners—you're a welcome part of a growing movement. The National Gardening Association predicts an almost 20% increase in home food gardening this year, and a little over 20% of those gardens will be planted by folks new to growing vegetables. Whether you're growing your own to save money, to eat fresher food, to protect your health and the planet or just to have fun, you'll find that it's really one of the most satisfying things a human being can do. Dig in and get ready to enjoy the fruits—literally—of your labor.

Step 1: Pick Your Crops



What do you want to grow? While our local climate offers us many possibilities, here are a few things to consider when picking your crops (see next page):

- **What are your favorite vegetables?**

Ideally these are what you'll be growing, as long as they're compatible with your other requirements of space and season.

- **What grows here, and when?**

In other words, what's ideal for the current season in Oakland? For example, broccoli and cauliflower are cool-weather crops, while tomatoes and melons are perfect for summertime growing.

- **How much space do you have?**

We'll get into that more below, for now just think about whether you'll be growing food in a few pots or preparing a larger garden area.

After you determine your flavor favorites, what's seasonally appropriate and what your general space situation is, finalize your selection.

TIP: Though it ultimately depends on your microclimate—Oakland's got a wide range, from foggy hills to sunny flats to windy coast—here's a partial list of easy & challenging crops for our neck of the woods:

Easy Crops: lettuce, cooking greens, tomatoes (especially cherry), squash, green onions, strawberries, beans, peas, cucumbers

Difficult Crops: corn, melon, sometimes broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbage

Step 2: Plan Your Space

Now that you've picked your crops, figure out exactly how much space you have for growing them and plan their placement accordingly. How much room will you give to each crop, and how many will fit in that space? Lettuce, for example, can be grown close together in an almost solid mat, but tomatoes need about 2 feet of space each—both grow well in pots too, along with beets, peppers, spinach and herbs. You can also grow vining plants, like beans and peas, on an existing fence or in a pot with stakes, saving horizontal space. Research space requirements online or at your local seed supplier—seed packets usually list recommended spacing.

TIP: If this is your first garden, start simple—even if you have a big yard an 8'x10' plot is large enough to grow lots of delicious produce and small enough to manage with little experience.



Step 3: Soil Preparation

If you're planting in pots just pick up a few bags of quality soil with organic amendments (manure, compost, etc)—you can find it at any local nursery. Set your pots up in your sunniest window or on a balcony if it gets enough sunlight.

If you're planting in the yard pick an area of flat ground that gets full sun nearly all day. A full day of sun is especially important if you're starting in early spring, early fall or winter.

Break up and turn the soil and add compost or other organic material (your local nursery will be happy to advise you on what's best for your particular crops and soil). Depending on the composition of your soil and the size of your garden, you may need to use a rototiller to really work your dirt. You can rent one, or borrow it for free from the Oakland Tool Lending Library at Temescal Library on Telegraph & 52nd. Check www.oaklandlibrary.org/Branches/temtll.htm for all the details.

If your soil is really poor or you can't/don't want to do the tilling work, put your energy into building raised beds instead. A few pieces of lumber and some nails can easily be turned into beautiful planter boxes—check www.eartheasy.com/grow_raised_beds.htm for instructions (scroll down the page, the top section has planters for sale) and consider The ReUse People in East Oakland (www.thereusepeople.org) or Urban Ore in West Berkeley (www.urbanore.ypguides.net) as great sources for scrap wood. Fill the planters with quality soil and amendments just like you'd do with a potted garden.

Important note about lead: If you live in an area of Oakland with lots of older homes and are planting your garden in the ground, we recommend that you test your soil for lead. **Call the Alameda County Lead Poisoning Prevention Program at 510-567-8282 for information on free testing.** If you do have unsafe lead levels in your soil you have two immediate options: grow your vegetables in containers or raised beds using new soil (see above), or add lots of amendments to your existing soil to dilute the concentration of lead if your levels are borderline. For additional solutions requiring more planning, check out this informative article from www.alchemicalnursery.org—search 'get the lead out' and download the document.

Step 4: Time to Plant!

Once you've got your soil set up, you're ready to get planting—exciting stuff! You can start with either seeds or seedlings, both can be found at any local nursery/garden center or online—check these sites for great selections of organic seeds and seedlings:

www.seedsofchange.com

www.organicseed.com

www.groworganic.com

Seeds are a great choice if you want the full spectrum of gardening satisfaction—kids and grown-ups both love to witness the miracle of a new sprout pushing up through the soil. Some will need to be started in pots (indoors or out, depending on the season) while others can go straight into the ground—just follow the supplier's suggestions for starting and transplanting. If your seeds need to be started in pots and you don't have any lying around, use things like yogurt tubs or take-out containers or paper cups—just be sure to poke a few holes in the bottom for drainage. Keep them moist until they sprout, then let them dry out a little between waterings. Keep extra seeds in an envelope in a dry, cool place—many seeds can still sprout a year later, just in time for next year's garden.

If you're starting later in the season, or are short on experience and nervous about growing from seeds, start your garden with seedlings. Buy them when you're really ready to put them in the ground since they're not meant to hang around in their little pots for weeks. Some seedlings will come with spacing information, otherwise check <http://home.howstuffworks.com/vegetable-spacing-guide.htm> for ideal plant spacing.



Taking Care of Your Plant Babies

Immediately after you've planted your garden, water it in. Use light water pressure so the soil surface isn't disrupted, and check for areas of uneven soil that create runoff. Even those areas out so water stays where you want it: in your garden.

If you planted seedlings this is a good time to mulch, to keep weeds down and slow water evaporation. Add a 2" layer of shredded bark, compost, grass clippings or straw—at least a couple of these should be readily available at the nursery. If you've planted seeds directly in the ground wait til they've sprouted and are about 5" tall before you mulch.



Watering: After the initial watering, allow your plants to dry out a little between regular waterings. 'Regular' varies depending on the time of year—you may only have to water a couple of times during an entire winter season. The best time to water is early morning, before it can evaporate in the sun's heat. Evening is ok too, though some gardeners feel that wet soil in the night creates conditions ideal for fungus and mold. After you water, stick your finger in the soil to make sure that it's absorbing water to at least an inch below the surface—this is the minimum depth needed for your plants to get full access and benefits from watering.

Consider installing a drip irrigation system, they're cheap and are great for saving water because they deliver it in smaller steadier amounts your plants can more easily absorb. We're lucky enough to have a great local resource, The Urban Farmer, with locations in Richmond, San Francisco and Mill Valley. These people know their drip systems and they're more than happy to help you figure it out—visit them online at www.urbanfarmerstore.com. For easy-to-understand information and tutorials on drip systems check <http://www.irrigationtutorials.com/drip-parts.htm> and DIG at www.digcorp.com.

Weeding: Regular weeding is important throughout your growing season, especially in the very beginning when your seedlings are developing and need all the resources your garden has to offer. Weeds compete with your plants for nutrients, water and sunlight, and they can harbor bugs and diseases you don't need around. Weeds are easier to control if you pull them while they're young; it'll be alot harder to keep them down once they seed. Ideally you can remove the weed roots and all, but while your seedlings are getting established you may have to just cut them off at ground level with a hoe so you don't disturb seedling roots.



How to deal with bugs:

Get ready: a variety of small creatures may decide to visit your new garden. This is not necessarily bad news—however if you do see evidence of munching on your plants, don't wait to act. Use these links to identify and address problem bugs using organic methods:

<http://vegipm.tamu.edu/imageindex.html> (great i.d. photos)

www.extremelygreen.com/pestcontrolguide.cfm

www.the-organic-gardener.com/organic-pest-control.html

We highly recommend that you use organic control methods, for your health and the health of your family, pets, community and environment. Organic gardening offers a variety of solutions for dealing with insects and other garden challenges, and there are many resources out there to support your efforts!

The goal of organic control is not complete eradication of 'pests' but rather to limit their damage in a balanced garden that has room for a healthy variety of bugs. There are hundreds of kinds of insects in your garden but only a handful are harmful to your plants—most are beneficial and a needed part of your garden ecosystem (bees and spiders are a great example). And someday soon those caterpillars eating your fennel will turn into gorgeous butterflies!

Feeding your vegetables, so they can feed you:

Unless you have the rare 'perfect soil', plants grown in Oakland will probably need some nutritional help sometime in their growing season. The compost and amendments you added to your initial planting bed are your best partners in the ongoing process of creating rich healthy soil, look to them first when feeding time comes around.

Note about composting: If you don't compost now, consider starting—it's actually pretty fun and easy to make dirt from food while you're making food from dirt! There's loads of info out there on composting, and Oakland even has a subsidized compost bin program to help you get started. Check www.stopwaste.org for the discount bins (click 'buy a discount compost bin' on home page) and then learn how to use them at <http://www.stopwaste.org/home/index.asp?page=441>.

There are times when your plants will need more nutrients than your soil can currently provide—that's the time to turn to organic fertilizers. Some of the most popular are bat guano and bone meal, both usually available at local nurseries. These are just the two most well-known options, there are many more! Check these three great sites for lots of info and recommendations for fertilizers depending on your soil composition and plant type:

www.goorganicgardening.com/organic-fertilizer

www.cleanairgardening.com/fertilizerguide.html

<http://www.extremelygreen.com/fertilizerguide.cfm>

More Resources

There are literally hundreds of gardening books and websites out there. Here's a short list of some of our favorite links, visit them along with your local nursery and library or bookstore for all the information you need to keep your vegetable garden healthy and productive for seasons to come.

www.vegetablegardeningguru.com

Info and tips on every aspect of organic gardening—excellent all-around resource

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag-06.html>

A wealth of details on every aspect of getting your garden started, including tool descriptions and seed variety suggestions

<http://www.weekendgardener.net/vegetable-gardening-tips/starting-garden-050705.htm>

<http://www.weekendgardener.net/vegetable-gardening-tips/maintain-garden-060706.htm>

Companion sites filled with detailed information including sample planting plans and in-depth growing guides for many vegetable types

<http://ghosttownfarm.wordpress.com/>

Novella Carpenter's super informative and entertaining urban farming blog

<http://acmg.ucdavis.edu>

Alameda County Master Gardeners, check the 'contact' page for Plant Doctor Hotline info

Books:

Golden Gate Gardening by Pam Pierce

How to Grow More Vegetables by John Jeavons

Nurseries:

Berkeley Horticultural Nursery, Berkeley	www.berkeleyhort.com	510/ 526-4704
Broadway Terrace Nursery, Oakland	www.broadwayterracenursery.com	510/ 658-3729
City Slicker Farms, Oakland	www.cityslickerfarms.org	510/ 763.4241
Dwight Way Nursery, Berkeley	www.yabusakisdwightwaynursery.com	510/ 845-6261
East Bay Nursery, Berkeley	www.eastbaynursery.com	510/ 845-6490
Encinal Nursery, Alameda		510/ 522-8616
Gomes Nursery, Oakland		510/ 632-7142
Spiral Gardens, Berkeley	www.spiralgardens.org	510/ 843-1307
Long's Garden Center, Oakland		510/ 654-2569
Thomsen's Garden Center, Alameda		510/ 522-3265
Thornhill Nursery, Oakland	www.thornhillnursery.com	510/ 339-1311



GrowYourOakland would like to thank Barbara Finnin at City Slicker Farms for her incredibly on-point insights and edits, and our many many loved ones who support us every day—we surely couldn't do it without you.

