

What type of garden should I plant?

Container Garden

Containers come in all shapes, sizes, and colors, making it easy to start a garden with little space!

Pro: You can set up a container garden anywhere! This is a great solution if you have a patio, balcony, porch, or other space where you can't plant in the ground. Container gardens don't require a lot of water, and you can start gardening right away without having to build anything or prepare garden soil: just set up your pot, add good-quality potting mix, and plant! Containers are also easy to move, which is good if you will be planting year-round — grow lettuce in partial shade in spring, then move the pots to a sunny location to grow tomatoes in the summer.

Con: Small containers can dry out quickly; large containers can be expensive. Containers work well for smaller plants like greens, strawberries, or special “dwarf” (small) varieties of tomatoes and peppers, but it's harder to grow large plant varieties or produce a lot of food with a container garden. Look for inexpensive large plastic pots or self-watering containers, group a few pots together so they help keep each other cool, and use a milk jug or water bottle with a few small holes punched in the bottom to slowly water plants. You can even plant in 5-gallon buckets or other recycled containers; just be sure to drill or punch drainage holes in the bottom first!



Raised Bed

A raised bed is a simple four-sided “box,” placed on the ground and filled with soil. It can be anywhere from 6 inches to several feet deep. You can set a raised bed just about anywhere as long as the ground is level — an unused patch of lawn, a nice sunny corner of your yard, or a concrete driveway or patio. The raised bed frame can be made from a variety of materials — lumber, logs, concrete blocks, even hay bales for a large bed!

Pro: Inexpensive to make if you build them yourself, especially if you use recycled materials (like boards from an old deck). Raised beds aren't as easy to move as containers, but you can use cinder blocks to make beds that are easy to take apart, move, or re-arrange. Raised beds are easy to tend and weed, and you can start with good gardening soil for healthy, happy plants, even if the dirt in your garden is heavy or not good for growing

things. You can also grow a lot of plants (and food) in very little space with a raised bed.

Con: Pre-made raised bed “kits” can be expensive, but there's no need to buy a kit if you build your own! You will also need extra soil to fill the bed, especially if your “ground” soil isn't good for gardening. You may be able to find some extra dirt in another part of your yard, but for the best results, buy bagged compost or good-quality garden soil to fill the beds, and mix with the soil you already have on site.

In-Ground

The traditional way of planting a garden — pick your spot, dig up your soil, and plant your plants right in the ground.

Pro: Simple and inexpensive! All you need to get started is a shovel and a good patch of ground — you don't have to build anything or even buy much to get started. For best results, though, you will need to add compost or other “organic matter” to the soil. This provides nutrients for the plants, makes for good drainage, and lightens heavy soils. It does take some time and work to dig up the soil and mix in the compost, but if you have a good place to put a garden, planting in the ground is probably the least expensive way to get started.

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Con: It can be a lot of work! You'll have to dig the soil, mix in your compost, and mark paths and rows. You'll probably also have more weeds to pull with an in-ground garden than with a container or a raised bed. Planting in the ground is an easy way to start a garden, but you may have more work to do in the long run. To cut down on maintenance, cover your soil with a 2 to 3" layer of mulch (straw, chopped leaves, compost, or shredded bark) to prevent weeds and keep soil moist.

Windowsill Box

Windowsill gardens are a fun way to try your hand at growing things, even if you don't have any room for an outdoor garden. You'll need a window with plenty of sun (at least 5-6 hours a day is best); south- or east-facing windows are often the sunniest. You can grow herbs, salad greens, and other small plants in your windowsill garden.



Pro: You really can garden anywhere! Plant your plants in small individual pots, or look for long, narrow "window box" planters at a nursery or garden center. Choose plants that do well in partial shade or small containers. Herbs like parsley, basil, and mint are a great place to start (and they are nice to have on your kitchen windowsill!)

Con: Not all plants will do well in a windowsill — tomatoes, for example, need lots of sun and deep soil, which is hard to provide indoors. But smaller plants like greens and herbs can grow happily inside, as long as you make sure they have good soil, regular water, and plenty of light. Small pots can dry out quickly, so you'll need to check them often. Make sure you have a saucer or tray under the plants, in case water or soil runs out of the pots!

Good for all gardens

Soil: For good plants, you have to start with good dirt! When buying soil for containers, look for products labeled as "Potting Mix." Check labels carefully: bags marked as *garden soil*, *topsoil*, "*partially composted*," or *mulch* will not be good for growing plants. A good-quality potting mix might cost a little more than inexpensive potting soil, but you will be rewarded with much healthier, happier plants and lots of tasty fruits and veggies!

Amendments: Gardeners often add materials to their soil to improve its texture and fertility. If you are planting in the ground, it's a good idea to add organic matter, like compost, to your "local" dirt. For containers, it's easiest to start with a bagged potting mix, which has a good balance of organic matter, sand, and nutrients.

Fertilizer: Fertilizer is especially important for container gardens and potted plants — they only have a small amount of soil, so they can use up the nutrients quickly. Use an organic fertilizer once a month, following package directions. You can also mix a slow-release fertilizer with the soil at planting time. Choose a fertilizer that is recommended for vegetable plants. Organic fertilizers are safest for use in children's gardens, as they do not contain synthetic chemicals.

Water: All plants need regular watering to thrive. Plants in pots can dry out especially quickly, so it's best to check them every day. If the top inch of soil is dry, it's time to water. (Seedlings and newly-planted plants should be kept damp all the time, until they get established.) Be careful not to over-water, though — make sure your pots have good drainage!

The same rules apply for raised beds and in-ground gardens. You may want to consider installing a simple drip irrigation system to water larger garden areas. (Check with a nursery or garden center for tips — many carry easy-to-install irrigation kits.)

Mulch: Used to keep the soil cool, prevent weeds, and conserve soil moisture. With a good layer of mulch, your garden will need weeding and watering less often, and your plants will be healthier. You can use a 2 to 3" layer of shredded bark, straw (not hay, which has seeds), chopped leaves, compost, or lawn clippings to mulch your garden.



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