So You Want to Start a Garden: Taking the First Step

You can probably just about taste that really fresh salad, imagine the bite out of your first homegrown tomato, or visualize the wall of colorful flowers. Getting started isn’t difficult, especially if you begin small, and consider a few things to begin with.

As you can tell from the volumes of material out there on gardening, and from the depth of information at gardening.cornell.edu, you can get overwhelmed pretty quickly. Below are some of the bare essentials of gardening. Start your plan here to maximize planting success.

What would you like a garden for?

Oftentimes, people get excited about the idea of gardening, and before you know it, you can smell the fresh earth generated from digging. First, though, think about what you want.

- Fresh produce: your main goal is to have good food to eat.
- Good looks: you want to spruce things up a bit.
- A place to hang out outdoors: you’d like to have a space outside that feels like an outdoor living room.
- Help the earth: maybe you’d like to feed the birds, create some green space, or teach a child to plant a tree.
- Connect to someone you care about: gardening is something you can do with friends, family or community members.

These are not mutually exclusive, and your dream may be some or all of the above. If you’re new to gardening, you might find greatest success tackling one approach at a time instead of jumping into making your home an oasis of green. For example, an easy place to start would be a small vegetable garden with a few easy crops such as leafy greens, beans, squash and cherry tomatoes or an annual flowerbed with colorful zinnias or marigolds.

Where are you thinking of locating the garden?

Since plants are living things, and need certain factors to grow, learn a little bit about your potential garden location. You will need to either pick plants that will do well with your available site (and containers, if that is the case) or if even possible make some changes to the site to create a favorable place for the plants you want to grow.
Ideal characteristics of a garden site include:

- Full sun; 6 to 8 hours of direct sun daily.
- Well-drained soil. No standing water after heavy rains.
- Flat landscape or a terrace across a slope.
- Good air circulation but protection from high winds.
- Distance from trees to minimize competition for light as well as water and nutrients.
- No low-lying frost pockets.
- Nearby water source.

We know you’re eager to plant, but first you’ll want to:

Locate a site, following the suggestions above. Whatever you think you can handle, size-wise, you may want to go with half that the first year. Start small, take good care of your garden, and next year, you’ll be ready for a larger plot.

Prepare your soil in the fall in anticipation of planting next spring. If you’re still learning about soils, and are unsure about what you have to work with, contact your local Cooperative Extension office for information about testing soil pH, organic matter and nutrient levels.

To learn more about crops check out the “how-to” link at gardening.cornell.edu. Go to the Growing Guides section under Garden.

Think about what you and your family really like to eat before planning your food garden. Vegetables will go to waste if what you grow doesn't match what you eat.

Did we already mention start small? There is nothing more discouraging than planting more than you can take care of. Each year, plant more of what you didn’t have enough of, and less of what was in surplus.

Make a map of your garden plan to help you visualize what it will look like and to make the best use of space. Avoid planting tall crops where they’ll shade out shorter ones.

If you’re thinking long term, you may be thinking about perennial crops, such as chives. For the beginner, it may be wise to wait a year or two before making this commitment. When you’re ready, group perennial crops -- ones that come back every year such as rhubarb and chives -- together along one side of the garden so they will be out of the way.

The fun part comes with choosing specific varieties. If you’re ordering seeds by mail, order early to guarantee availability. During the winter get acquainted with the possibilities by talking with people, looking at catalogs and for vegetables and some herbs check out Cornell’s Vegetable Varieties for Gardeners site (vegvariety.cce.cornell.edu). Here you will find thousands of varieties reviewed by other gardeners and seed sources.