

Why grow vegetables?

Growing your own vegetables brings many benefits and, if you haven't tried it yet, it's a lot easier than you might think. Here are a few tips to start you off.

Q Why should I grow my own vegetables?

A There are many benefits to growing your own vegetables:

- ❖ Fresher food. Your produce can be in the kitchen minutes after picking, with all its goodness and taste intact.
- ❖ More flavour. You can pick your veg at the best point for flavour - crisp runner beans and ripe, aromatic tomatoes beat shop-bought veg by miles.
- ❖ Wider choice. Grow the varieties you want, chosen for taste not shelf life; grow types of veg you don't see in the shops and explore the world of heritage varieties, long lost to commerce.
- ❖ Fewer pesticides. It's your choice whether to spray or not and you know exactly how the crop has been treated.
- ❖ Double health benefits. Growing veg doesn't have to be hard work, but it will give you some healthy outdoor exercise. In addition, if you grow your own, your 'five-a-day' health target will be much easier to meet.

Q What is the fastest veg I can grow from seed to maturity?

A The radish is the quickest veg to reach maturity. Its plump, juicy, spicy, colourful root can be ready to eat just four weeks after sowing. Choose long, narrow,

pink and white 'French Breakfast' or round, rosy 'Cherry Belle'.

Q Are there even quicker ways to grow something tasty?

A Mustard and cress only takes a few days on a damp paper towel. For more substantial eating, try sprouting seeds - they'll be ready in less than a week. You can also harvest salad veg such as lettuce, lambs' lettuce, chicory, Chinese leaves and rocket at the seedling stage. Sow a patch of mixed seeds and, when they are two or three inches high, shear them off just above soil level. Use the leaves in salads - the plants will regrow in a few weeks.

Q Can I buy young plants instead of starting with seeds?

A Most garden centres sell a range of vegetables as plants in spring. You can usually find cabbage, courgettes, cucumbers, French beans, lettuce, peppers, runner beans, sprouts and tomatoes, and you may find aubergines, broad beans, broccoli, cauliflowers, leeks, sweetcorn, sprouts and squashes, too. Lettuce is a good choice if you want fast results, and buying plants can be an economical way to grow crops such as courgettes or tomatoes where you only want one or two plants. It's well worth

exploring local boot fairs too; they often have interesting veg plants at good prices.

As well as saving time and effort initially, bought-in plants can help you carry on if disaster such as an unexpected frost, or an attack of voracious slugs, decimates your seedlings.

Q Can I grow vegetables in the flower beds?

A Certainly. Many vegetables are attractive enough to plant in ornamental areas of the garden and pests are less likely to find them mixed in with flowers. You can try French beans, especially those with interesting pods such as 'Purple Teepee', 'Yellow Waxpod' and spotted 'Borlotto'. Runner beans were originally grown as ornamental plants. Train them up wigwams of bamboo canes or willow to add focal points to borders. As well as red flowers there are white or pink types, plus the pretty orange and white 'Painted Lady'. Decorative lettuce makes a good edging. Have some seedlings coming on in pots to replace them as you harvest the crop. 'Lollo Rosso' (red-tinged) and 'Lollo Biondo' (pale green), reputedly referring to Gina Lollobrigida's knickers, give an ultra-frilly effect, or go for 'Salad Bowl' or 'Oak Leaf', which you

harvest by picking a few leaves at a time so they last for weeks. For late summer and autumn colour, grow coloured-stem varieties of leaf beet. It's available in gold, red, pink and purple, as well as brilliant white.

Q What will give me the biggest yield for my efforts?

A Cucumbers, courgettes, squashes and tomatoes will all yield 2kg per plant in a reasonable summer. Potatoes and runner beans will produce at least 1kg per plant, and are less fussy about the weather.

Q I've got an empty new garden. What fills space and looks good?

A How about courgettes? Each plant will easily fill a square metre with its bold, scalloped, silver-blotched leaves. The flowers are large and golden and attract bees. Try green 'Supremo' or yellow 'Taxi'. Once the frost arrives, they conveniently collapse, leaving space for permanent planting.

Q Can I grow veg in pots?

A Almost all veg can be grown in pots, provided you can keep them watered, and the pots are big enough to allow enough root space - 25-30cm across and 20-25cm deep is a minimum for most crops. French beans are a good choice and are easier to pick from the height of a pot; also, tomatoes, especially compact varieties like 'Tumbler', or lettuce.

Q I'm really more of a cook than a gardener, so which easy veg are the most versatile in the kitchen?

A Potatoes have to be number one - there are whole cookery books full of just potato recipes. 'Accent' is a reliable new potato. For salad potatoes try 'Charlotte', 'Nicola', or 'Roseval' with bright-red skin and yellow flesh. Tomatoes, leaf beet, courgettes and squash can all be cooked in scores of different ways. Sophie Grigson's 'Eat Your Greens' has lots of ideas, and 'Cool Green Leaves and Red Hot Peppers' by Christine McFadden and Michael Michaud concentrates on growing and cooking for maximum taste.

Q What veg can I grow over winter?

A Leeks are the classic winter vegetable and can be cropped from October right through to March. 'Musselburgh' is a reliable, hardy, old variety. Leaf beet also crops well into autumn and early winter. There's an interesting range of winter radishes too. Traditional European varieties include 'Black Spanish Round' with white flesh and black skin, or long, white, German varieties such as 'München Bier'. Or try the amazing Japanese 'Mantanghong' with green skin and pink flesh.

Q Which vegetables are best for children to grow?

A Sprouting seeds are quick and easy. In a windowbox or tub try radishes, or buy lettuce seedlings to grow on. 'Minigreen', 'Blush' and 'Little Gem' are tasty miniature varieties.

❖ For children with more staying power, runner beans are interesting to grow, or go for squashes in all kinds of weird and wonderful colours and shapes.
❖ Older children may enjoy growing veg in the 'wrong' colours such as yellow, pink, white, or black-skinned tomatoes, purple or spotty French beans, red lettuce, purple carrots or blue potatoes.

Q Taste is what really matters to me, so what should I grow?

A All home-grown veg will be fresher and tastier than shop bought veg. You can also grow gourmet varieties, which are rarely available in the shops. Tomatoes are an obvious choice, from the tiniest 'Red Currant', the size of a pea, to huge, yellow 'Pineapple', the size of a grapefruit, with virtually every size and colour in between. There are literally hundreds of varieties, and it's getting easier to buy seed every year.

If you grow your own squashes, you can eat fresh summer ones like 'Little Gem' when they are small and tender, or grow rich winter varieties like 'Crown Prince', which also store well.

For needle-thin French beans, grow varieties such as 'Safari'. Peas are not the easiest of vegetables to grow but, for beginners, mangetout (flat-podded) or sugar snap (round-podded) varieties are a good choice. They are more worth the effort, as you eat the pod as well, and they are very expensive in the shops.