



Gardening for health – starting

Gardening has many health and therapeutic benefits and it's very enjoyable. It's an activity that everyone can enjoy. People with disabilities, seniors and children can be especially rewarded from spending time in the garden tending plants and growing their own food. With some planning and thought you can create an interesting, productive and pleasant space that can be an edible garden.

An edible garden does not have to be large. Your garden can start small with a few pots and containers or even just a window box with a few suitable cuttings or herbs.

Benefits of growing an edible garden

Research shows that gardening is a healthy activity. Working in the garden provides benefits that include:

- **Enjoyment** - from the physical activity
- **Exercise** - improves your endurance, strength, mobility and flexibility
- **Relaxation** - helps you relax and reduce stress levels
- **Fresh food** - provides you and your family with a healthy variety of inexpensive fresh food.

Grow things you can eat

An edible garden is a garden that contains flowers, herbs, seeds, berries and plants that you can eat. Flowers and herbs can be used in salads, to add flavour to cooked dishes, made into teas or as a garnish. Plants, vegetables and fruits can be eaten raw or cooked. Examples of flowers, herbs and plants that are suitable for an edible garden include:

- **Flowers** - borage, carnation, chamomile, chrysanthemum, fuchsia, geranium, hibiscus, hollyhock, honeysuckle, impatiens, lavender, lemon blossom, lilac, marigold, nasturtium, pansy, rose, salvia, snapdragon and violet.
- **Herbs** – basil, chives, sage, mint, oregano, parsley and thyme
- **Seeds and berries** – lilly pilli, pumpkin, sunflower and wattle seeds
- **Vegetables** – lettuce, tomatoes, silverbeet, corn, capsicum and beans
- **Fruits** – lilly pilli, rhubarb (stems are fine the leaves are poisonous), strawberries and passion fruit.
- **Plants and trees** – yuccas (leaves and flowers are edible) and bay trees.

Everything you pick to eat should be washed carefully. Only eat flowers in salads if they are organically grown and free of pesticides and other garden sprays. Be aware that some flowers, seeds and leaves can be toxic.

An edible garden can be any size

An edible garden can be started in a small area. Courtyards, balconies, porches and very small gardens are all suitable sites. If a raised garden bed is not specifically required, you can create a space directly into the soil in your garden. The area selected should be flat and receive reasonable amounts of sunlight and some shelter from the wind. There should be a garden tap nearby so you can water plants easily but ensure the walking surface will not become slippery. A shed, cupboard and bench are useful to store materials and to pot-up plants.

Suitable containers

There are a variety of containers that can be adapted to grow plants in. These include:

- Old wheelbarrows or prams (hood removed or folded down for maximum sunlight) that can be moved about
- Old bathtubs or laundry tubs with holes for drainage
- Old car tyres that can be stacked on top of each other at different heights
- Plastic and terracotta pots on castors that can be moved around easily
- Large pots, polystyrene boxes, barrels, large terracotta pipes and recycled containers.
- Purpose built raised garden beds can be made to suit your needs. (Contact the Horticultural Therapy Association of Vic 03 9848 9710 for more information)

Gardening tips

Hints that will help to help create a successful edible garden include:

- If you have a north-facing wall consider growing suitable plants or vines up the wall in containers.
- Remove weeds regularly as they rob the soil of valuable nutrients.
- Compost most garden materials (leave out the problem weeds) and all vegetables and fruit scraps from the kitchen (you may want to leave out the pumpkin seeds because they'll pop up all over your garden where the compost is used)
- Use mulch and organic fertilisers.
- Rotate crops regularly (every season or at least every year) to ensure that soil stays fresh.
- Use non-chemical remedies like garlic, chilli spray or milk to ward off pests.

Protect yourself when you're gardening

When you're gardening outdoors there are a few safety tips that you should follow. These include:

- Wear sunscreen and protective clothing including a hat, correct footwear and gloves.
- Warm up, bend and stretch before you start.
- Take regular breaks and don't forget to stretch and change position often.
- Bend at the knees and don't strain when lifting heavy objects.
- Drink plenty of water especially in warm weather.
- Store garden tools and equipment safely
- Observe safety instructions when using potting mix, any sprays or fertilizers.

Where to get help

- Community or local garden groups
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Vic. Tel. (03) 9848 9710 www.horticulturaltherapy.com.au
- Cultivating Community Tel. (03) 9415 6580 <http://www.cultivatingcommunity.org.au/>

Things to remember

- Gardening is a healthy activity that can be enjoyed by people of all ages
- An edible garden can be started in a very small area or in containers or pots.
- Ensure that your plants are non toxic varieties and edible
- Don't use chemical sprays or fertilisers in your edible garden.