

Chapter 1

Becoming a Grow-Your-Own Gardener

In This Chapter

- ▶ Reaping the benefits of growing your own
 - ▶ Gathering the tools you need
 - ▶ Assessing your plot
 - ▶ Deciding what crops to grow
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So you've decided to grow your own fruit and vegetables. Congratulations! Few activities in life are more rewarding than producing your own food. You'll discover that nothing beats the satisfaction of picking a sun-ripened tomato and popping it straight in your mouth, or sitting down to lunch knowing that you grew all the veg yourself.

As you start down the road of growing your own, be prepared for a few twists and turns, and some highs and lows along the way. You may find some plants more challenging than others, and not everything will go to plan. But if you start with the simple things and follow the basic rules – which is where this book comes in – your successes are sure to outweigh any failures.

First of all, though, you need some real reasons to get growing – incentives to help you through the tough patches, a few tools, a plot of land, and an idea of what you want to grow. Let's go.

Recognising the Advantages of Growing Your Own

More and more people are becoming aware of the different benefits of growing your own fruit and veg. These vary from reducing your food costs and improving your health and diet to doing your bit for the planet through lower *food miles* – the distance food has to travel between where it grows

and where it's eaten. People are acting upon this awareness, too; just look at the ever-growing waiting lists for allotment plots and the increasing sales of seeds of edible plants. Even people without access to a large plot are now discovering that their own gardens and patios can produce useful crops.

Saving money

Many people decide to grow their own fruit and veg because they think they're going to save money. Think carefully if you're one of these gardeners. Whether you actually save money depends on where you live and what access you currently have to fresh produce. For example, if you have a local market selling fresh produce you may already be able to buy cheap veg.

How you think about growing your own has a bearing on saving money, too. If you see it as a chore and cost in your labour, your fruit and veg may work out expensive. However, if you enjoy pottering, digging and generally being out in the open air, you can forget about including labour in with the costs.

For most people, and with careful planning, growing some types of crop yourself definitely can save you money. For example, you pay the same amount in a supermarket for a bag of salad leaves as you pay for a packet of seeds that produces dozens of bags of leaves. And because you can grow most vegetables from seed, doing so saves you more than if you buy them as plants.



With some crops, such as asparagus, you can choose between growing them from seed and buying a ready-grown plant. With other vegetables, however, such as Jerusalem artichokes or potatoes, you don't have a choice other than to buy them as ready-grown plants, roots or tubers.

Similarly, fruit trees won't save you time or money, at least until the tree is well established. For example, if you buy an apple tree to grow in a pot, the tree doesn't start turning a profit for many years because it can carry only small crops.

Eating fresh

Without a doubt, the fact that you can eat fruit and veg as fresh as nature intended is a huge benefit of growing your own. Picking and eating crops within minutes not only feels good, but it's also healthy for you.

Fruits that are fully ripe don't just taste great; they're packed with nutrients, too. Some crops, such as apples and pears, don't deteriorate much as they're transported and stored, but most do start to lose nutrients as soon as you pick them, especially leafy, green vegetables that contain a lot of vitamin C.

Some crops, such as chard, deteriorate so quickly that shops rarely sell them. Sweetcorn, too, loses its sweetness quickly after harvesting and growing your own is the only way to discover its raw sugary tenderness. Soft fruits such as currants, raspberries and strawberries also travel badly and are worth growing yourself. Similarly, the longer you store fruit and veg and the more they're processed, the more nutrients are lost.

You are what you eat, as the old saying goes, and so eating produce fresh from your own garden gives you the nutritional best from your crops, and your body is much better off as a result.

You'll also discover just how much tastier fruit and veg can be when *really* fresh. For example, did you know that when ripe, gooseberries aren't hard and acidic but soft and sweet? And have you ever eaten a peach fresh off the tree when the flesh is so juicy you need a napkin? Or have you eaten an apricot just as it's perfectly ripe, with flesh as sweet and juicy as a peach? All these treats, and many more, are yours to experience when you grow your own.

Growing food metres, not miles, from your doorstep



With concern about the welfare of the environment at an all-time high, you have a huge environmental advantage in growing your own fruit and veg. You can sidestep the issues of over-packaging, chemicals, fertilisers and *food miles* – where crops are flown and driven around the world – and reduce your own negative impact on the environment. You may not be able to grow all your needs but you can produce at least some crops within metres of your back door. Aside from keeping Mother Nature happy, just think of the convenience of being able to pop out and pick fresh tomatoes, salads or herbs.

Experiencing more variety

You rarely see certain crops, such as leaf beet, Swiss chard, purslane, mizuna and many more in the shops. They just don't travel well enough. If you're lucky enough to have a good farmers' market near where you live, you may be able to find some of these crops there when in season, but you can do without the risk by growing them at home. Many other crops, such as sprouting broccoli, rocket and asparagus peas cost a fortune if you do find them, and yet you can easily grow them yourself.

Strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and redcurrants are also expensive to buy, and are often damaged when you buy them. Because of this, soft fruit really is worth growing yourself, and you can grow different and often better varieties than you find in the shops. Did you know, for example, that gooseberries come in red and yellow as well as green? Commercial growers pick

their varieties based on how consistent they are in size and shape, whether they have heavy crops, and whether they travel well. They often pick fruit unripe in order to transport it, and so you can never buy some fruits that are fully ripe. You can, on the other hand, choose varieties that have the best flavour, need fewer chemicals to produce (or none at all), are resistant to disease, or crop out of season, extending the time you can eat them.

Feasting without chemicals



In recent years consumers have become more concerned about additives and chemicals in food. Growing your own returns power to the consumer – you have the choice of what chemicals to put on your food or you can choose to grow crops entirely without using chemicals. You can grow some crops easily without having to spray them with chemicals, but others are more difficult. The cabbage family, for example, can be a challenge to grow well without resorting to some chemicals, but at least you choose what you apply to your crops and what you use. You can also select varieties that are resistant to disease so you have an easier time when growing organically.

Looking at the broader picture

Growing your own isn't just good for your finances and for the planet; growing your own is good for you, too! Gardening is a healthy activity, and helps to keep you fit. (An hour of digging can burn 500 calories, so just a little active gardening each week can boost your health in more ways than just providing vitamins!) You also get out in the sun (at least, when it comes out to play) and you're more in touch with the seasons and seasonal produce – qualities that are impossible to cost, but are really priceless.

Tooling Around: Kitting Yourself Out

Like any activity, gardening is more rewarding and a lot easier if you have the right tools and equipment. Choose wisely, and remember the old saying 'buy cheap, pay twice'. You may be able to pick up bargain tools, and some cheap tools can be good value, but well-made tools serve you better in the long run. Nothing is more annoying than setting aside time to hoe or dig and your tool breaking halfway through the task.



Always inspect tools before you buy. Check handles for balance and smoothness. Check the materials and the weight – you may find working with light tools easier. Buy tools that suit your size and build. Never be afraid of buying a smaller tool if you can't manage a large one – you work faster and more efficiently when you're comfortable.

Certain tools you need only once or twice a year, and so try not to get carried away filling your shed or garage with a huge armoury. Here's a rundown of the basic essential tools.

✓ **Spades and forks:** You can buy two basic sizes: the *digging* and *border* (or *ladies*) sizes. The digging versions do as their name suggests. The border versions are great for general planting and soil cultivation, where their smaller size is an advantage.

- **Spade:** You need a spade mainly for digging, but also for planting, harvesting some plants, and moving soil around. Prices vary hugely, as does design, but expect to pay around £20 for a decent stainless steel spade. Shaft length varies as well, so pick up and test the 'fit' of the spade before you buy. Some have treads on the blade, where you put your foot, to make digging easier, and the bottom edge of the blade should be sharp. Make sure that you see no rough splinters or protruding metal where the shaft fits into the *ferrule*, or tubular socket, on the blade because these may cut your hand. I recommend buying stainless steel spades – their highly polished blades don't just look the business, they're easy to clean and use, too, especially in heavy, clay soils.
- **Fork:** You need a fork for digging, breaking up *clods* (lumps) of soil, loosening the soil surface in preparation for planting, and digging up plants and root crops such as carrots and potatoes. Forks are especially useful in soil that's very heavy (for example, clay soils) or full of stones, where getting a spade into the soil may be tricky. The fork to buy is the general digging fork that has four, evenly spaced *tines* (spikes). You can also buy a 'potato fork', which has broad, flat tines that are less likely to 'spear' the tubers as you lift them, but this is a luxury. A good fork costs about £20.

✓ **Rake:** A garden rake (not a grass or wire rake) is essential for levelling soil and removing stones and large lumps from the surface when preparing seedbeds and for evenly spreading fertiliser. You can purchase rakes as part of a multi-tool system. Prices start from as little as £10.

✓ **Measuring line:** You need a line of string for making sure your lines of seedlings are even and straight. You can buy a line or use two canes and some string. Nylon string is less likely to rot in use than natural twine.

✓ **Hoe:** You need at least one type of hoe to help you control weeds. The two basic, popular designs are the *Dutch* or *push hoe* and the *French* or *draw hoe*. If you buy only one hoe, and unless you're growing potatoes (which you can easily 'earth up' with a French hoe), the Dutch hoe, with a straight, sharp blade pointing away from you, is the most useful and versatile. When using, you keep the blade as horizontal as possible and push it just under the soil surface to chop the tops off weeds, which should then wilt and die. The French hoe has a curved 'neck' so the blade, tucked under the head of the tool, faces you and cuts through the soil as you pull the hoe towards you. With a French hoe, you can easily

control the path of the blade and weed more accurately, with less risk of chopping off and damaging plants. Prices start from about \$10.

- ✓ **Trowel:** You need a trowel for planting. A trowel is like a small spade with a pointed blade to make planting holes. Thin trowels are useful for weeding but most have the same basic shape. When choosing a trowel, make sure that the handle is comfortable and not sharp or rough. The only time you may be able to do without a trowel for planting is when you plant brassicas, because those plants prefer well-firmed soil, and a *dibber* (a solid, usually wooden shaft with an angled handle) is therefore better. You can pick up a good trowel from as little as \$5.
- ✓ **Multi-headed tools:** Many systems offer a range of interchangeable handle lengths and tool heads. These enable you to have a variety of tools without buying lots of handles. Be aware, though, that you usually can't mix 'n' match tools and handles from different systems, so make sure that you choose the system offering the tools you need before you start to buy and commit yourself. Prices vary enormously but expect to pay \$10 for a handle and about the same for most small tools.
- ✓ **Sprayer:** A good sprayer is useful; even if you intend to garden organically you're probably going to need to use some organic sprays to control common pests. *Trigger sprayers*, where each pull of the trigger releases a burst of spray, are cheap but hard work to use if you have to spray a lot of plants. *Pressure sprayers*, where you pump the handle to produce pressure in the container to produce a continuous burst of spray, cost more but are far easier to use.

Buying a sprayer means that you can buy and dilute concentrated chemicals. You don't have to buy ready-to-use chemicals, which, although convenient and handy when you start growing your own, are the most expensive way to buy chemicals. Ready-to-use chemicals also involve a lot of waste because you're buying diluted chemicals and a spray bottle with every purchase.
- ✓ **Propagator:** A propagator is useful for raising seedlings earlier than you can outside. A basic propagator consists of some sort of waterproof tray and a transparent lid. You can easily make your own but most gardeners buy one. Unheated, basic propagators, however, have limited use. Light is essential for seedlings so you need to place an unheated propagator in a greenhouse or on a windowsill, and without extra heat you're limited in what you can successfully grow. An electrically heated propagator without a thermostat is useful because it provides constant heat, but the temperature inside depends on the outside temperature, which is a problem when the weather's cold at night and too hot on a sunny windowsill. Heated propagators with a thermostat are considerably better, and can help to avoid overheating and damage to seedlings. Prices start from about \$25 for a good thermostatically controlled propagator.



- ✓ **Pots:** The variety of pots and trays you need depends on what you intend to grow. You can sow many crops directly into the soil outside but you need to sow others, such as courgettes and other squashes, some brassicas, tomatoes and cucumbers, in pots and place them to start growing in warm conditions such as on a windowsill or in a propagator. For most purposes, 8-centimetre pots are ideal for sowing small quantities of seeds and for growing tomatoes and so on. Small seed trays are also useful for sowing seeds and growing micro-greens such as cress. Cell trays, divided into 6 or 12 individual cells, are also useful for sowing seeds individually and growing seedlings.

Use clean or new pots and trays for sowing seeds to reduce the risk of fungal diseases that harm seedlings.

- ✓ **Compost:** Potting compost comes in three basic types but don't confuse them with the compost from the heap at the bottom of your garden. Garden compost has its uses but is far too variable to use for sowing or growing in pots and best kept for mulching and use in the open garden.

Throughout the book, when I refer to compost in the context of raising plants, I mean one of these types of potting compost:

- **John Innes compost** is the traditional choice, available in four grades from seed sowing through Nos 1, 2, and 3 for plants as they get progressively bigger. John Innes composts are based on sterilised loam (soil) and contain some *peat* (partially decomposed organic matter with minimal plant nutrients). Their quality varies according to the loam and they aren't 100 per cent recommended for growing young plants. But No 3 is excellent for any plant you're growing in a pot for more than one year, such as fruit trees.
- **Multipurpose composts** were, until recently, based on peat, but with environmental concerns coming to the fore, most are now 'reduced-peat'. These composts are ideal for seed sowing and growing young plants but they contain enough nutrients for only a few weeks of growth, and so you then need to give them some supplementary feed.
- **Peat-free composts** are increasingly common and popular but they vary enormously, depending on their origins. Many are made of recycled products, and others are based on *coir* (coconut husk). You can achieve satisfactory results with most of them, but many contain less nitrogen, among other nutrients, and you may need to alter your watering and feeding regimes if you're used to peat-based composts. Peat-free composts are probably not ideal if you're just starting out with growing, especially for more difficult plants such as peppers and basil.



Buying cheap compost can be false economy. Buy from an outlet that stores compost under cover and never buy bags that have faded print or are soaking wet: use only fresh compost for seed sowing.

✓ **Clothing:** You can buy a range of clothing for gardening but in most cases old, stout clothing suffices. However, you do need gloves – especially when pruning thorny fruit such as raspberries and gooseberries – and stout footwear is essential when digging.



Be sure to use gloves and goggles when you're using a *line trimmer* (for trimming grass and vegetation), and when spraying always wear protective clothing as the product manufacturer recommends. Garden accidents are regrettably frequent but with some common sense you can avoid getting in harm's way.

Getting the Plot

Now you've decided to grow your own fruit and veg, you need to decide where to grow them. How much space you have doesn't matter, in fact, a big plot can sometimes be overwhelming. Whether you have a patio or a field you can make a start right away. All you have to do is make sure that what you want to grow and how you intend to do it suits your circumstances.

Back garden

People are sometimes put off growing their own fruit and veg because they think they need a lot of space or have to give over their attractive flowerbeds to vegetable plots. The fact that you don't need a dedicated vegetable garden to grow your own crops may come as a surprise. Having a dedicated plot does make things easier for you, and simplifies *crop rotation* (avoiding growing crops in the same soil every year), but isn't essential, and you can grow many crops among flowers. Nor do you need a large space – you just have to be more selective in what you choose to grow. Winter and spring crops usually occupy the ground for the longest periods so you may want to concentrate on fast-growing summer and autumn crops. What's more, you don't always have to sacrifice a good-looking garden when growing your own: fruit bushes and trees are often almost as attractive as ornamentals so you can easily incorporate them into your borders.



If you can give over an area of your garden to grow fruit and veg, a convenient way is to make raised beds. Chapter 2 tells you all you need to know about creating them.

Pots and containers

to you as a space for growing produce. No matter – pots and containers enable you to grow your own fruit and veg even when space is *really* limited. Growing in this way can save you time and even enable you to avoid some common problems.

Growing in pots and containers may seem a novel idea, but it's really not new at all. For centuries, miners in the north of England grew fruit in pots and developed *pot leeks* in their small backyards, though for showing rather than as food. You can do this, too. You don't need special containers; just find a container with drainage holes and if it doesn't have any drainage holes, drill to make some. Drainage holes are essential to ensure that the compost doesn't get waterlogged in wet weather. The size of the container is also important because small containers that hold a small volume of compost dry out quickly and aren't so easy to look after. But aside from these considerations, you may be surprised at what you can grow fruit and veg in: old compost bags, rubbish bins, wheelbarrows, old boots... Just use your imagination!

Chapter 2 is the place to go for more information about growing in containers.

Allotments

Allotments (and large plots) enable you to grow a wide range of crops and staple crops such as potatoes in large quantities. They come with their own advantages and problems, though. Previous growers have often cultivated allotments for many years so you may find that you have good, well-worked soil, or else stumble upon lots of pests and diseases already present on or near the plot. You may equally find that your allotment plot has been neglected and needs a lot of work to get into a usable state. But a good allotment plot is great to have, gives you more options when choosing what to grow and enables you to pick the brains of and have some laughs with other people gardening at the same allotments. Chapter 2 has the lowdown on acquiring and looking after an allotment.

Knowing What You're Growing

So you've decided that you want to grow your own. But do you know what fruit and vegetables actually are? From a botanical perspective, *vegetables* are the stems, roots and leaves of plants, whereas *fruits* are what results from a flower. So rhubarb is a vegetable and tomatoes, cucumbers, aubergines and chillies are fruits. But gardeners define things differently, and have a different perspective: to gardeners, *vegetables* are savoury and *fruits* are sweet!

Growing tasty veg

When you start to grow your own food you soon discover what a huge range is available. Your usual weekly shop will probably influence your choice of what veg to grow at first; looking through catalogues can open your eyes to many more crops. Take it steady, but don't be afraid to try something new.

Leaf crops

Leaf crops are important and healthy vegetables because of the nutritional value of their leaves. They are low in calories but high in other nutrients. The most important group are the *brassicas*, which include broccoli, cabbage, kale, cauliflower, oriental greens and sprouts. All brassicas prefer an alkaline soil (check out Chapter 4 for a full rundown of soil types), partly because they suffer from a soil-borne fungal disease called clubroot, which thrives in acid soil. The wealth of brassicas available means that you can harvest crops at any time of year. Many brassicas prefer heavy, clay soils but Oriental cabbages grow best in light soils rich in humus. Because other leaf crops, such as salad leaves, lettuce, chicory and leaf beet (chard), come from plants that are unrelated botanically, and tolerate a wide range of conditions, something is sure to thrive in your conditions. Salad crops are generally quick to grow and ideal for small gardens and for impatient gardeners.

Chapter 8 tells you all you need to know about growing leaf crops.

Root crops

Root crops – which include carrots, parsnips and swedes – count among their number some of the most important crops you can grow. Traditionally, root crops were important because they store well and provide food through the winter. Root crops are *biennial* plants, which means that they grow one year, flower the next, and then die. To help their flowering, early in the second year they store food in their roots – this store of sugars and starch is the bit that we eat, halfway through their lifecycle. Most root crops, onions and leeks included, grow best in light soils because heavy clay can impede the growth of the roots through the soil. Heavy manuring and stony soil can cause twisted, branched and misshapen roots.

I talk about how to raise your own root crops in Chapter 9.

Potatoes and other tubers

Potatoes are a staple crop and if you have a large plot you can easily grow large quantities to use throughout the winter. But you can also make use of even the smallest space to grow a few. Potatoes are grouped in various ways, such as by usage and skin colour, but usually by their time to maturity. So you can choose from *earlies*, *second earlies*, and *maincrop*. Of these varieties, earlies tend to have smaller tops (*haulms*) and because they mature before

blight, the most destructive disease of potatoes, is widespread each summer, they are the easiest to grow. Earlies are also something of a treat, and so all in all they make the best use of space. Other tuber crops, such as Jerusalem and Chinese artichokes, are even easier to grow but less adaptable in the kitchen.

Head to Chapter 9 for the lowdown on growing your own spuds.

Greenhouse crops

Vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, aubergines and cucumbers all need warmth to grow well. Each crop has varieties suitable for outdoor growing but they depend on good, warm weather and you need to provide them with shelter and careful positioning for them to thrive. Even so, they remain some of the most popular of all home-grown crops and are suitable for growing in containers. All greenhouse crops are far better in quality and taste if you grow them at home, and so make them top of your list of crops. Tomatoes, peppers and cape gooseberries make excellent choices for beginners.

I cover growing greenhouse crops in Chapter 10.

Pods

Peas and beans are worth growing, not just because they're better fresh than the ones you buy in shops but also because they add nitrogen, one of the main plant nutrients, to your soil. Runner beans are the most popular with home gardeners for a worthwhile crop, because the ones you buy in the shops are poor quality. French beans are equally popular, easier to grow, and you can get good crops. Broad beans take up a lot of space and are possibly not worthwhile in small gardens but are delicious if you pick them young. Peas are a luxury crop – they take up a lot of room, can be difficult to grow well because of the many problems that affect them, and frozen peas are, honestly, just as good as fresh peas if you cook them. But mangetout and sugarsnap peas are worth the effort if you have room to grow them.

Chapter 11 is the place to go for pod planting.

Herbs

You can grow a wealth of different herbs for adding flavour to your cooking and beauty to your garden. Herbs are a diverse group of plants that vary from fast-growing annuals to shrubs, and many flourish in gardens. They need a wide range of conditions and although some, such as basil, can be difficult to grow well, others like mint can become almost weed-like if they find cosy conditions in your garden. Start off growing herbs that you're likely to use, such as parsley, thyme, sage and mint and then try some of the more unusual herbs, as well as edible flowers such as nasturtiums.

Head to Chapter 17 for more info about herbs.

Planting luscious fruit

Fruits are generally divided into two categories: soft and top fruits. *Soft fruit* includes raspberries, strawberries, currants and gooseberries, which growers tend to harvest in midsummer, as well as blackberries, loganberries and blueberries. Most soft fruits are small plants and are well suited to growing in a limited space. Most are tough, frost-hardy, and not difficult to grow. Some, such as blueberries and strawberries, grow well in containers and so are worth considering if you don't have much space. Soft fruit plants are fairly quick to produce a crop, with most starting to crop in their second year onwards, so you don't get *too* hungry waiting to pick your own fruit! (Head to Chapters 13, 14, and 16 if you're looking to get started growing your own soft fruit.)

Fruits such as apples, pears, plums, cherries and peaches are all known as *top fruits*. They are large plants and most take two or three years before they start to crop. As well as needing more space than other fruits, they also come with other complications because most, apart from peaches and some special varieties, need another tree of a different variety to pollinate the flowers to get a crop. This means they need a fair amount of space but with careful training you can grow many varieties even in a small space. (Chapters 15 and 16 tell you all you need to know about growing top fruits.)

Fruits from seed

You can't grow many fruits from seed because they don't breed true to type, unlike vegetables, but those that you can at least give you a quick crop while you're waiting for your apple trees to start cropping. Cape gooseberries are a good fruit to grow from seed in a greenhouse or on the patio, giving you a tasty and worthwhile crop. The adventurous can try garden huckleberries, which need cooking to make them edible. You can grow other fruits such as strawberries and rhubarb from seed, but most are better bought as plants.

Buying plants

Most fruit plants crop for many years, and because you're investing a lot of time and space in them it pays to invest in good stock. Where possible, buy fruit from specialist nurseries that can supply you with detailed growing information as well as the latest varieties best suited to your needs. Most soft fruit sold by reputable nurseries and specialists is certified free of the yield-reducing viruses to which these fruits are prone, giving your plants the best possible start in life. Never accept old plants from other allotment holders in case they're infected with disease (the plants, not the gardeners!).

You can buy most fruit when dormant in winter but potted plants are available all year round. Potted plants generally cost a little more and you may not have such a wide choice of varieties.