Easy guide to...

GARDENING FOR BEGINNERS

Amateur GARDENING

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Please note that the free seeds mentioned are not available in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland due to EU regulations. We apologise for any disappointment this causes.

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Contents

Basics

Getting started 7
Planning 8
Soil 10
Design 13
Colour theory 15
Cottage gardens 19
Formal gardens 22
City gardens 24
Low maintenance gardens 26
Small space gardening 28

Choosing plants

Annuals 32
Perennials 33
Roses 34
Native plants 35
Shrubs 37
Small trees 39
Evergreens 41
Grasses 42
Bulbs 43

Indoor plants

Houseplants 86
Indoor edibles 93

Planting

Planting basics 45
Sowing seeds 46
Cold frames 49
Succession sowing 51
Growing on and planting 52
Containers 63
Hanging baskets 64
Growing vegetables 69
Shrubs and trees 74
Salad leaves 71
Potatoes 72
Carrots 74
Kale 75
Tomatoes 76
Peppers and chillies 77
Companion planting 78
Herbs 86
Seasonal advice 96
Cover seed instructions 120

Care

Watering 56
Feeding 60
Compost 101
Pruning and maintenance 104
Sustainable practices 108
Troubleshooting 116
Pests and diseases 112

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the wonderful world of gardening! Whether you're dreaming of a lush back garden, a thriving vegetable patch, or simply want to keep a few houseplants alive, gardening is a journey, and like any good adventure, it's filled with excitement, learning, and yes, a few challenges along the way.

Remember when you were a child, and the simple act of planting a seed and watching it grow felt like magic? Well, that sense of wonder doesn't disappear as we grow older. In fact, as you delve into gardening, you'll find that the magic only deepens. There's something profoundly satisfying about nurturing life, whether it's a sturdy oak tree or a delicate herb.

But let's be honest – gardening can also be a bit daunting at first. There's so much to learn, from understanding soil types to decoding plant labels that seem to be written in a foreign language. We're here to guide you through the basics, demystify the jargon, and help you avoid some of the common pitfalls that trip up new gardeners.

We'll take you on a journey from planning your garden (yes, a bit of planning goes a long way!) to choosing the right plants for your space and climate. We'll explore different types of gardens, from cottage gardens to cosy balconies, and show you how to make the most of whatever space you have. For those of you keen on growing your own food, we've got chapters dedicated to vegetables and herbs. And if you're more of an indoor person – we've got you covered with tips on houseplants too.

Of course, we'll also delve into the nitty-gritty of garden care – watering, feeding, pruning, and dealing with those pesky pests and diseases. But don't let that intimidate you. With a little knowledge and practice, these will become second nature.

So, roll up your sleeves, grab your gardening gloves, and let's dig in. Your garden adventure starts here. Remember, every expert gardener was once a beginner too.

Happy gardening!

Getting started

If you've never gardened before or have just moved to somewhere with a garden that's new to you, getting started is exciting but it can also be a bit daunting. However, with a bit of planning and preparation, you can set yourself up for success. If there's an existing garden that you want to change, or put your mark on, it's a good idea to proceed slowly, as there may well be plants there that you can't see yet, depending on the time of year. If you're in doubt about what a plant is, leave it to 'do its thing' before making any decisions about its future. It might become a star!

The first step is to evaluate the space you have available and understand your local climate, especially if you've moved from one end of the country to the other. Things may be very different in your new location.

Begin by examining your space

✿ **Sunlight:** Observe how much direct sunlight different areas receive throughout the day. Of course, this will vary depending on the time of year, so make sure you factor that in. Most vegetables and flowering plants need at least six hours of direct sunlight daily.

✿ **Soil quality:** Check your soil type (clay, sandy, loamy) and pH level. You can buy simple soil testing kits from garden centres. Knowing the type of soil you have will tell you what you can do to improve it, and it will help when it comes to choosing plants.

✿ **Drainage:** Notice if there are any areas where water tends to pool after

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS ALAMY UNLESS OTHERWISE CREDITED

If you don't have a traditional garden, don't be discouraged. Balconies, windowsills, and small patios can all be transformed into thriving green spaces with container gardening, and you can grow things indoors too

it rains, as these might require improved drainage, or you can use them for damp-loving plants.

✿ **Existing features:** Take note of anything that might affect your plans. Does your shed have electricity? There will be a cable buried somewhere!

✿ **Wind exposure:** Identify areas that are particularly exposed to wind, as strong winds can damage delicate plants or dry out the soil. Consider using windbreaks like fences or hedges, or choose hardier plants for these spots.

Climate considerations

Understanding your local climate is crucial for selecting appropriate plants and planning your gardening calendar. Key factors include:

✿ **Hardiness zone:** This indicates the average annual minimum winter temperature and helps determine which plants can survive in your area. Usually this is a range of temperatures, so some individual plants may need added protection in certain sites.

✿ **Frost dates:** Knowing your average first and last frost dates helps you plan when to sow, plant and harvest. There are plenty of online sites that will give you an indication of these dates when you enter your location.

Top tip

You don't have to have separate areas for flowers and vegetables if you're short of space. Interplanting the two can result in a garden that's productive and beautiful, and you'll benefit from the pest-protection of companion planting

PLANNING YOUR GARDEN

A well-planned garden is more likely to be successful. Everyone makes mistakes, so don't worry too much, they can usually be fixed, but starting with a clear idea of what you want will really help

Basic tools and equipment

Having the right tools can make gardening more enjoyable and efficient. There are a few essential basics you'll need to get started, and you can add to these as you progress.

- **Hand trowel:** For digging small holes and transplanting.
- **Garden fork:** Useful for turning soil and compost.
- **Secateurs:** For trimming and pruning plants.
- **Watering can or hose:** Essential for keeping your plants hydrated.
- **Garden gloves:** To protect your hands while working.
- **Wheelbarrow or garden cart:** Helpful for moving soil, compost, or plants.
- **Rake:** For levelling soil and collecting leaves.
- **Spade:** For digging larger holes and edging.

1. **What are your goals?** Do you want to grow food, create a beautiful flower display, or a bit of both? Knowing what you want to do will determine your plant selection and garden layout.

2. **Choose your plants:** Select plants that suit your climate, available space, and your ultimate goals. There's no point in growing runner beans if you don't like them! Consider things like the plant's eventual size, sun requirements, and water needs.

3. **Create a layout:** Sketch a rough plan of your garden. It doesn't need to be a work of art, but it will help you place taller plants where they won't shade shorter ones, group plants with similar needs together, and ensure easy access for maintenance. It will also serve as a record of what you planted where. At the time, you think you'll remember, but over the winter it's easy to lose track of where you planted bulbs, for example.

4. **Consider companion planting:** Some plants grow well together, enhancing growth or deterring pests. For example, marigolds can help protect tomatoes from certain pests, and salvias under roses is said to deter aphids.

Grass paths will need regular mowing and edging.

5. **Plan for succession:** To ensure a continuous harvest or display, plan to plant in stages or choose plants that flower at different times.

6. **Start small:** It's often better to start with a smaller, manageable garden and expand as you gain experience and confidence.

7. **Allow for paths:** Ensure you can easily access all parts of your garden for maintenance without compacting the soil.

8. **Think about water sources:** Plan your garden with easy access to water, whether that's near a tap for your hose or your watering can, or rainwater harvesting into a butt.

Remember... Gardening is all about learning, and it's okay to make mistakes, everyone does. Your plan will more then likely change and evolve as you gain experience and discover what works best for you and your location

The right stuff

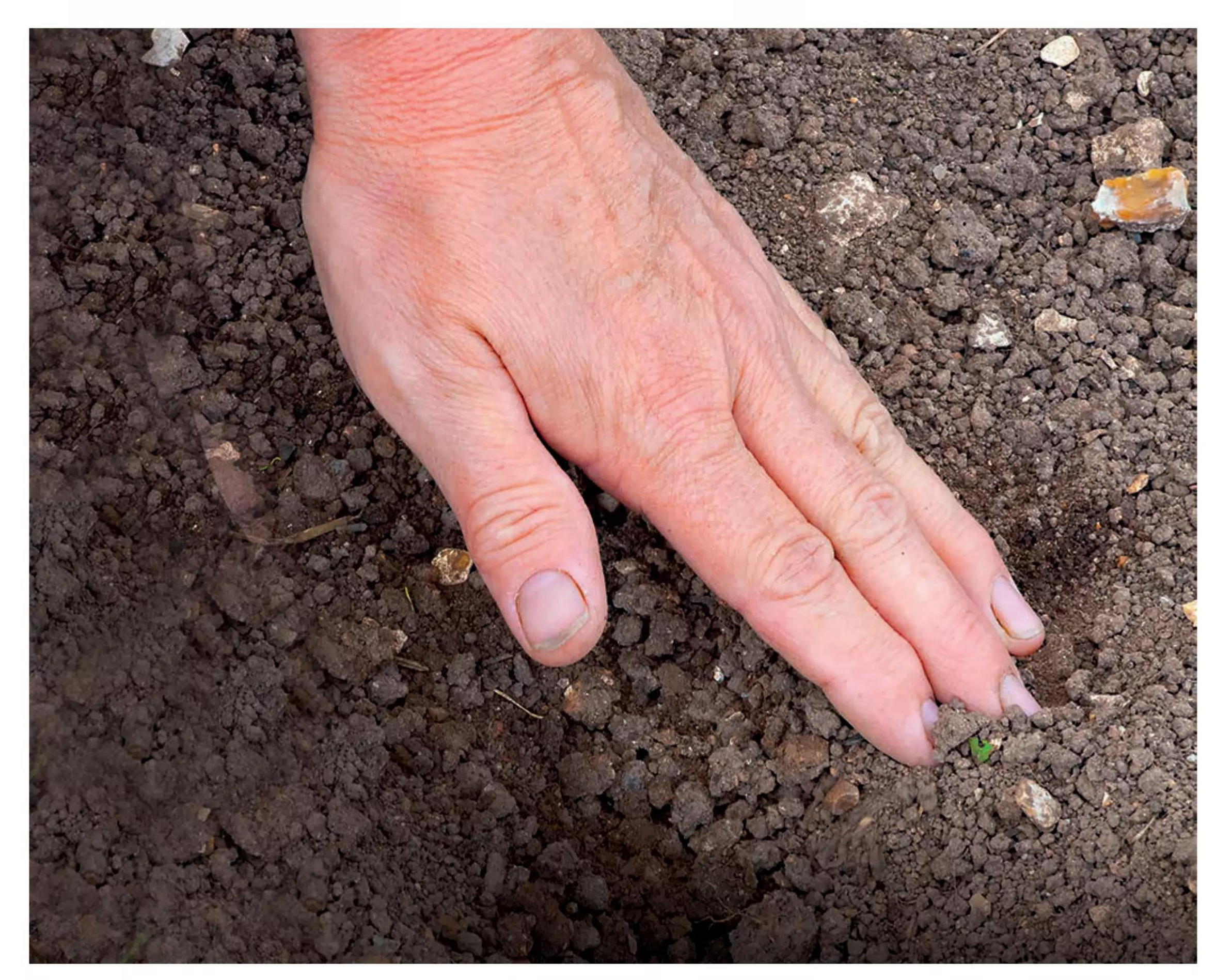
Soil is the foundation of any successful garden. It provides essential nutrients, water, and plant support. But how do soil types vary, and why do you need to know what yours is? Plants have evolved to grow in very specific conditions in their natural environment, and if you want to use them in anything other than these, you'll need to make adjustments to the soil to allow for that.

Soil is so much more than just 'dirt', and although it tends to be taken for granted unless there is a problem, it is actually complicated stuff. It is a diverse environment of bacteria, fungi and soil organisms that all need to work together if plants are to thrive.

Soil types and composition

Soil is made up of mineral particles, organic matter, water, and air. The size and proportion of these components determine the soil type, and can be altered to improve the composition. Soil is usually defined by the size of the soil particles it contains and grouped according to three main categories: sand, silt or clay.

✿ **Sandy:** Sandy soil is composed of large particles; it drains fast and warms up quickly in spring, but it doesn't retain nutrients well. With a sandy soil, the sample will have a coarse, gritty feel when rubbed between the fingers. The particles won't stick together when wet and very sandy samples will sometimes leave a yellowy-orange



stain on your hands. Sandy samples are very open and loose when dry. They have a large particle size, ranging from 0.02mm to 2mm.

✿ **Clay:** Made up of tiny particles, clay soil retains water and nutrients efficiently but can become waterlogged and compacted. It hardens and cracks in summer in areas that aren't protected by a good flush of growth or mulch. Consider planting ground cover to help mitigate this. Clay soils tend to feel sticky and can be moulded into shapes, as the particles stick together. They are usually heavy and cold when wet. Clay consists of very small particles, usually less than 0.002mm.

✿ **Silt:** With particles smaller than sand but larger than clay, silt soil is fertile and holds moisture well but can become compacted. Silty soils tend to be smooth and have a 'silky' feel when handled, but they aren't sticky. The particles don't mould together well and often appear crumbly. They tend to be an intermediate between sand and clay, with particle sizes varying between 0.002mm and 0.02mm.

✿ **Loam:** Considered ideal for gardening, loam is a balanced mixture of sand, silt, and clay. It retains moisture and nutrients while providing good drainage.

✿ **Chalky soil:** High in alkaline, chalky soil can be drought-prone and may lack some nutrients.

✿ **Peat:** Rich in organic matter, peat soil is acidic and retains moisture well but is rarely found in gardens.

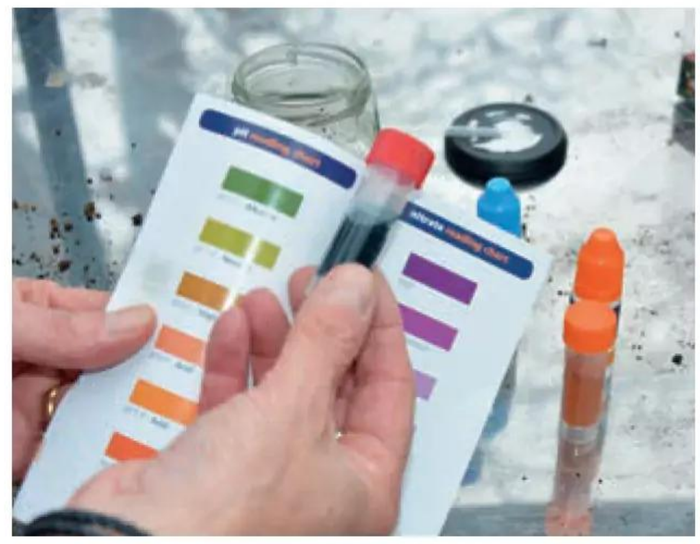
A quick, practical test to assess how gritty, crumbly or sticky your soil is, is to add a small amount of water to a soil sample and clench it in your hand. Try rolling it into a ball and see how well it holds its form.

Soil testing

Testing the chemical makeup of your soil is as important as understanding its physical properties and provides valuable information about your soil's pH and nutrient levels. You can buy home testing kits from garden centres or send samples to professional labs for more detailed analysis.

Key aspects to test include:

- **pH Level:** Most plants prefer a slightly acidic to neutral pH (6.0-7.0). Some, like rhododendrons and blueberries, prefer more acidic soil.
- **Nutrient levels:** Tests typically measure levels of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K), the primary nutrients plants need. Nitrogen is important in spring as it feeds new shoots and plant growth. Phosphorus keeps plant roots healthy and functioning (bone meal is an essential source), and potassium is vital for generous flowering and fruiting and helping build disease resistance.
- **Organic matter content:** This indicates the soil's ability to retain water and nutrients.



DIY testing kits are available for nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium content (NPK), and soil pH (shown here).

Top tip

Don't walk on waterlogged soil until it dries. If you absolutely have to work it, stand on a plank so your weight is evenly distributed and doesn't compact and damage the soil

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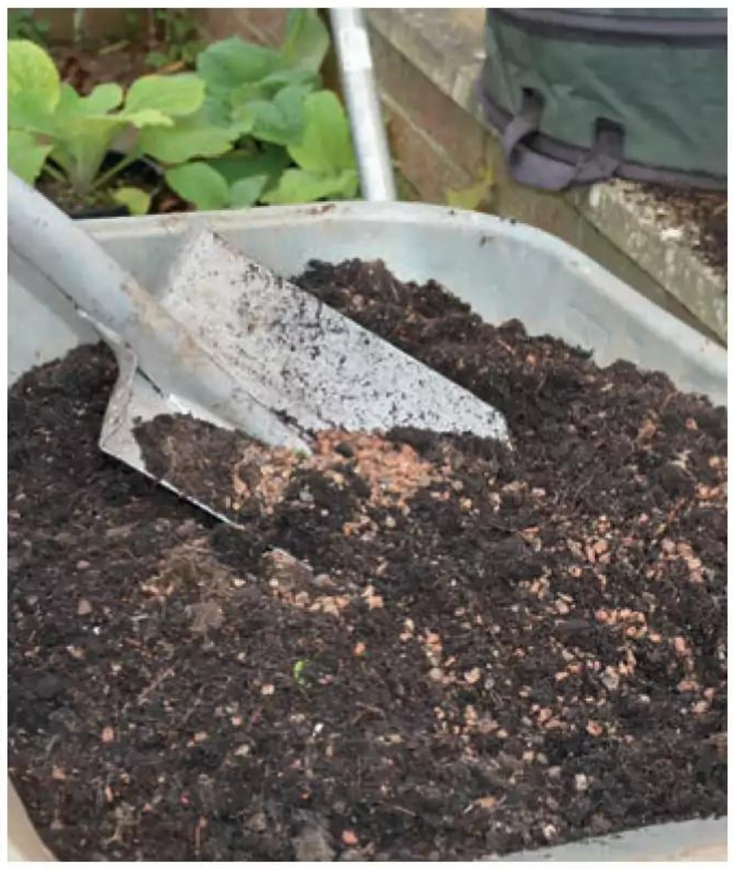
Chalky soils can dry out quickly, and may not hold nutrients well.

How to... Improve soil quality

Once you understand your soil type and its characteristics, you can take steps to enhance it

1. **Add organic matter:** Compost, well-rotted manure, or leaf mould can improve soil structure, water retention, and nutrient content. Add a layer of 5-10cm every year.

2. **Mulching:** Apply a layer of organic mulch around plants to conserve moisture, suppress weeds, and gradually improve soil as it breaks down.



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Grit will help improve clay soils, as well as adding good drainage properties to soil used in containers.

Adding well-rotted manure will benefit all soil types, and ideally should be done annually.

3. **Crop rotation:** When growing vegetables, crop types are rotated yearly to prevent nutrient depletion and reduce pest and disease build-up.

4. **Green manures:** These are fast-growing plants that are sown to cover bare soil. When dug in, they add organic matter and nutrients.

5. **Adjust the pH:** Add lime to increase pH (make the soil more alkaline) or sulphur to decrease pH (make the soil more acidic).

6. **Improve drainage:** For heavy clay soils, add grit or sharp sand or consider growing in raised beds.

7. **No-dig method:** This involves adding organic matter to the surface of the soil without digging, which preserves soil structure and helps beneficial organisms.

8. **Use appropriate fertilisers:** Based on your soil test results, apply organic or inorganic fertilisers to address specific nutrient deficiencies.

9. **Avoid compaction:** Use boards or designated paths to walk on, especially when the soil is wet, to prevent compaction. Compacted soil can become waterlogged, driving out the oxygen and killing plants.

Persian clover cover crop

10. **Cover crops:** Plant cover crops such as clover or mustard greens in unused areas or during off-seasons to prevent soil erosion and add nutrients when they are turned into the soil in the spring.

It may take several seasons of improving your soil to achieve significant changes, but the results are worth the effort. Healthy soil leads to healthier plants, which are more resistant to pests and diseases and produce higher yields and more flowers.

Did You know?

Earthworms are a good indicator of soil health. They aerate the soil as they move around, improving drainage, as well as dragging organic matter down under the surface, spreading nutrients as they eat and then excrete it

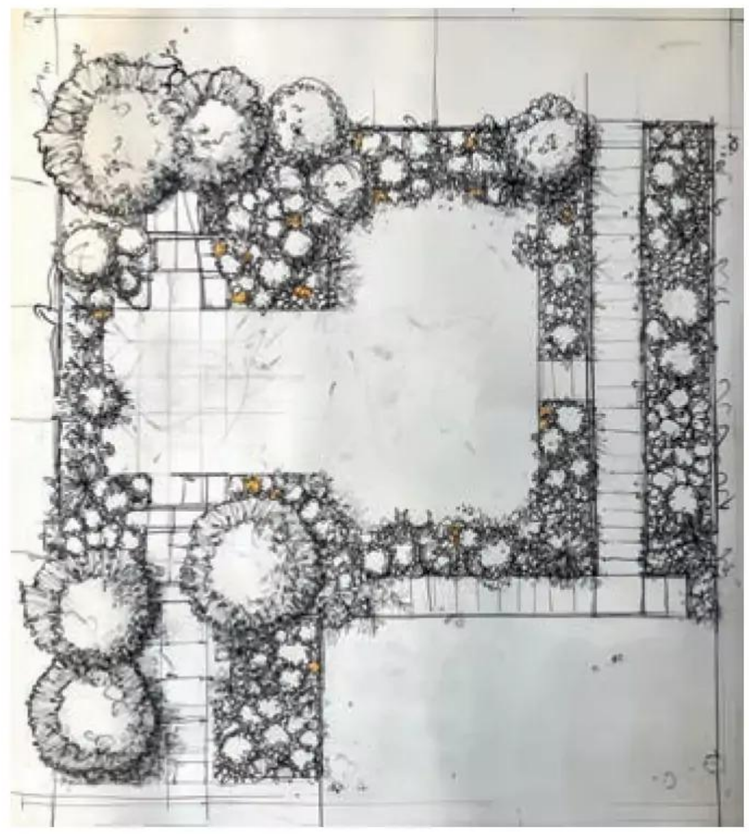
Garden design

Creating a garden involves more than just planting flowers and shrubs. To create a space that's not only attractive, but is practical and offers your plants the optimum growing conditions, takes thoughtful planning and an understanding of basic design principles. This doesn't mean you have to be a draftsman and produce an amazing, professional aerial plan, but understanding a few key principles will make things much easier and more effective.

Basic layout and design

If you're starting afresh with a brand-new border, you'll need to consider its shape in context to the overall outlook of your garden. Perhaps smooth, flowing curves, or a more formal, angular, straight-edged border will look best. The same principles apply for a border that you can walk around, (island borders, they used to be called). Its shape needs to be sympathetic to its surroundings and its size proportionate to the rest of your garden.

If you're rejuvenating an existing border, any overgrown or misshapen shrubs that you want to include in your new layout will need to be pruned or lifted and moved elsewhere. Similarly, jaded perennials can be divided and re-used, or set aside to include in your new border.



Cohesive design

Just as with a home interior, use repeating elements (plants, colours, or shapes) throughout the garden. Ensure they all work together to create a definite look and theme. As nice as it is to buy just one beautiful plant, gardens can lack cohesion with one of this and

Top tip
Plant in odd numbers and create drifts rather than blocks of colour

Use vertical elements (trellises, arches) to add height.

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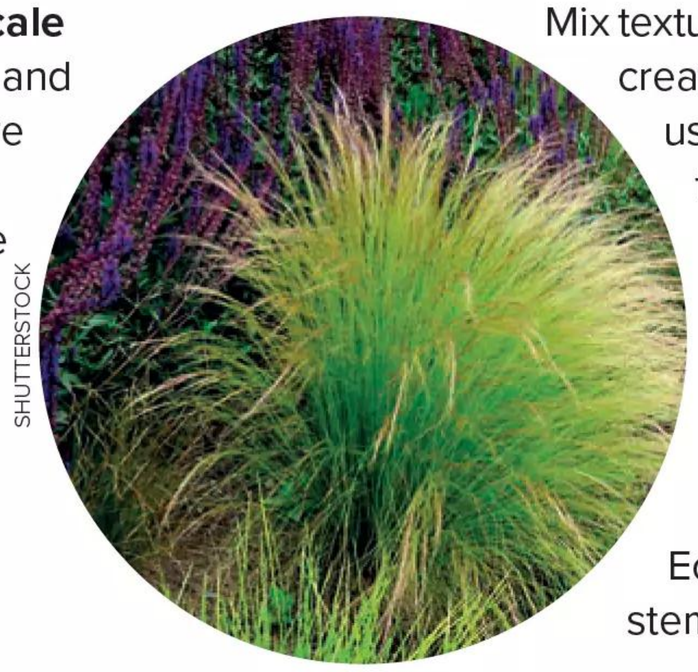
another of that dotted around. It is better to plant three or five of a plant that you really like, in a swathe or block to create more impact. It's also more pleasing to the eye to have plants at different heights popping up through the border, with the smaller ones towards the front and larger ones towards the back or middle. Just remember not to be afraid to mix it up a little and experiment.

Balance

Symmetrical balance is a mirror-image design on either side of an axis – identical beds on either side of a path, for example – often used in traditional gardens. This is easy to plan and plant, since it's essentially repeating itself. Asymmetrical balance looks more natural. Think cottage gardens, with the balance provided by different elements based on their visual weight, colour, texture, and form. For example, a tree on one side balanced by a group of smaller shrubs and perennials on the other.

Proportion and scale

Ensure plant sizes and garden features are in proportion to each other and the space, and remember to account for the mature size of plants when planning.



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Rhythm and line

Use repetition of plants or features to create a sense of rhythm. Incorporate curved or straight lines to guide the eye through the garden, and mirror these with your planting.

Contrast and variety

Mix textures, shapes, and sizes to create visual interest, and use contrasting elements to highlight specific features. This type of planting is great for year-round interest; the contrast of soft billowing grasses interplanted with Echinops with its rigid stems and striking

Consider the changing seasons when planning your garden's colour scheme. Include plants that offer vibrant foliage or berries in autumn and winter, ensuring year-round interest even when flowers aren't in bloom

Top Tip

Use bright colours like reds and oranges to create energy in the garden. Cooler tones, such as blues and purples, provide a calming effect and make small spaces feel larger

flowerheads looks spectacular whatever the season. Add an evergreen or two, of differing forms, some spring bulbs and summer planting, and you have a year's worth of appeal, all in one spot.

Wildlife

No matter what size your garden, consider using plants that will encourage beneficial pollinators and butterflies to visit. *Verbena bonariensis*, *Echinacea purpurea*, buddleia, hellebores and Mahonia 'Soft Caress' are great choices.

If space allows, frogs, toads and newts will use even a small pond or water feature to breed, as will damselflies, dragonflies and pond skaters.

Resilience

Choosing plants that will thrive in the conditions where they're to be planted and applying a thick mulch of well-rotted garden compost or shredded bark will lock in valuable moisture around the roots, minimising the need for watering and helping to conserve precious water supplies. Mulching also suppresses weeds and protects the soil, adding much needed nutrients, which in turn means less feeding down the line.

COLOUR THEORY IN THE GARDEN

Colour wheel basics

We all learned this at school but, for some of us, that was a long time ago! The colour wheel is made up of three sets of colours. The primary colours are red, blue and yellow. Secondary colours are green, orange, purple and are made by mixing primary colours, and finally there are the tertiary colours, which are mixtures of primary and secondary colours.

Colour schemes

Fashion has rules about colour, but nature has a marvellous way of just doing its own thing, and it never looks bad. That's not to say that it couldn't look better, but if you make a mistake and plant pink penstemons under a red rose, firstly, you may love it, and secondly, you can always move the penstemons for next year!

You could have different borders with individual colour themes: hot, fiery beds with reds, oranges and yellows, and cool, contemporary plantings in blues, pinks, purples and white.

Single-coloured plantings can also be very effective, but plant a white border with care, selecting a supporting colour like purple or pale yellow, dotted in between, to soften the starkness.

You can choose to stick to one theme, or you can use several schemes throughout different areas of your garden. You could choose to plant white flowers among ferns in damp, shady areas, leading to pastel shades as you come into the main border, getting brighter and more 'primary' towards the distance, which helps draw the eye to the far end of the garden, maybe towards a feature, or specimen plant. It's your garden, and you can exercise your own taste.

Colour wheel planting

MONOCHROMATIC

Various shades and tints of one colour, which can be particularly effective in creating a sense of tranquility and cohesion

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✿ **White**

- **Flowers:** White roses, lilies, phlox, cosmos, and daisies
- **Foliage:** Silver-leaved plants like *Senecio cineraria* and lamb's ear
- **Accent:** White-variegated hostas and cream-coloured ornamental grasses

✿ **Purple:**

- **Deep purple:** Alliums, clematis and iris
- **Light purple:** Asters and verbena
- **Foliage:** Purple-leaved heuchera and dark-leaved elderberry

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✿ **Pink:**

- **Pale pink:** Cherry blossoms, pink dogwoods, and pale pink roses
- **Medium pink:** Dianthus, peonies and pink salvias
- **Foliage:** Pink-tinged heucheras and Japanese Painted Fern (*Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*)

Also try:

✿ **Green**

- **Light green:** Hostas, ferns, and certain ornamental grasses
- **Medium green:** Various shrubs and trees for structure
- **Dark green:** Boxwood and yew for deeper tones
- **Chartreuse:** *Alchemilla mollis* and Heuchera 'Lime Marmalade' or 'Electra'

✿ **Yellow**

- **Pale yellow:** Primroses, evening primrose, and pale daffodils
- **Bright yellow:** Black-eyed Susans, coreopsis, and sunflowers
- **Golden yellow:** Goldenrod and yellow day lilies
- **Foliage:** Golden hostas and yellow-variegated grasses

COMPLEMENTARY

Colours opposite each other on the colour wheel

✿ Purple and yellow
Purple • Yellow
Buddleia • *Achillea filipendulina*
Liatris spicata • Helianthus
Campanula • *Kerria japonica*

✿ Red and green
Red• Green
Monarda didyma • *Alchemilla mollis*
Crocosmia 'Lucifer' • Helleborus
Kniphofia uvaria • *Nicotiana alata*

✿ Blue and orange
Blue • Orange
Agapanthus • *Asclepias tuberosa*
Ceanothus • Geum 'Totally Tangerine'
Platycodon grandiflorus • Helenium

✿ Pink and lime green
Pink • Lime green
Lychnis coronaria • *Euphorbia characias subsp. wulfenii*
Gaura lindheimeri • *Nicotiana alata* 'Lime Green'
Echinacea purpurea 'Magnus' • Chrysanthemum 'Anastasia Green'

ANALOGOUS

Colours next to each other on the colour wheel

✿ Purple, blue, and pink
Purple: Lavender
Blue: Forget-me-nots
Pink: Hardy geraniums
– These plants bloom at similar times, creating a soft, cohesive look in late spring to early summer

✿ Yellow, orange, and red
Yellow: Daffodils
Orange: Wallflowers
Red: Tulips
– This combination works well for a vibrant spring display in borders or containers

✿ Green, blue-green, and blue
Green: Hart's tongue fern
Blue-Green: Hostas (particularly varieties like 'Halcyon')
Blue: Bluebells
– Ideal for creating a cool, tranquil shade garden

✿ Pink, red, and purple
Pink: Peonies
Red: *Lychnis chalcedonica*
Purple: Alliums
– This grouping offers a rich, warm colour palette for early to midsummer

✿ Yellow, yellow-green, and green
Yellow: Primroses
Yellow-green: Golden Oregano (*Origanum vulgare* 'Aureum')
Green: Ferns (such as the native male fern, *Dryopteris filix-mas*)

TRIADIC

Three colours evenly spaced on the colour wheel

✿ Red, yellow, and blue
Red: Red roses, *Lobelia cardinalis*, or red tulips
Yellow: Rudbeckia, yellow daylilies, or sunflowers
Blue: Delphiniums, blue salvias, or cornflowers

✿ Purple, orange, and green
Purple: Lavender, Echinacea, or alliums
Orange: Marigolds, orange daylilies, or California poppies
Green: Ornamental grasses, hostas (for their foliage), or euphorbia

✿ Pink, teal, and yellow-orange
Pink: Pink peonies, pink cosmos, or dianthus
Teal: Teal-blue hostas (like 'Halcyon'), Eryngium, or certain succulents
Yellow-Orange: Calendulas, yellow-orange dahlias, or wallflowers

Top tip

Consider including plants with interesting foliage to complement the flower colours and provide texture. Above all, choose colours that you like!

Remember... when using any of these colour schemes, you don't need equal amounts of each colour. Often, using one colour as dominant and the others as accents creates a more pleasing and natural-looking garden design

COLOUR EFFECTS

As well as providing a mood or theme, colour can be used to elicit particular feelings and responses. Warm colours (reds, oranges, yellows) appear to advance, and create excitement. A pop of a bright colour in the distance draws the eye, bringing that area into focus.

Cool colours (blues, purples, greens) appear to recede and create a calm atmosphere, and white and light colours can brighten shady areas.

Seasonal colour

Plan for colour throughout the year by including plants with different bloom times. Consider adding foliage colour for year-round interest.

Creating focal points and interest

Focal points are standout elements that draw the eye, for example a specimen tree, sculpture, or water feature. These should be placed at the end of paths or viewlines

Layering

One of the most important considerations is to ensure there is sufficient and appropriate height and structure in your border. Plant in layers, with taller plants at the back, medium in the middle, and shorter in front, and create depth and interest by overlapping plants. Plant in curves and drifts, so some elements appear in front, or behind, others. A well-chosen tree always provides a lovely focal point, even in a smaller garden, and looks great underplanted with shrubs, perennials and bulbs. If you're going to choose a tree, look for one that provides more than one season of interest and check its ultimate size. Some good options include Cercis 'Forest Pansy', Acer palmatum 'Winter Flame' or Cercidiphyllum japonicum.

Texture

Mix plants with different leaf sizes and shapes, and combine fine-textured plants like grasses with bold-leaved plants for contrast.

Movement

Include plants that move in the breeze (eg, ornamental grasses, Verbena bonariensis), and consider how pathways and features guide your movement through your garden.

Surprise elements

Create hidden areas or unexpected views, and use garden art or unique plant specimens to add personality.

Plant in layers, with taller plants at the back, medium in the middle, and shorter in front.

Use paths to draw you into discovering secret areas.

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Tips

1. Start with a plan or sketch of your garden layout
2. Consider the views from inside your home as well as within the garden
3. Use odd numbers of plants for a more natural look
4. Create year-round interest with a mix of evergreen and deciduous plants
5. Incorporate hardscaping elements (paths, walls, seating areas) to define spaces
6. Consider maintenance requirements when selecting plants and features
7. Allow space for plants to grow to their mature size
8. Create a sense of journey through the garden with winding paths or hidden views
9. Don't be afraid to edit – sometimes removing elements can improve the overall design
10. Use lighting to extend garden enjoyment into the evening
11. Incorporate personal elements that reflect your style and interests
12. Consider the architectural style of your home when designing your garden
13. Create outdoor living spaces that extend your home into the garden
14. Be patient – gardens evolve over time, so allow room for growth and changes

Garden design is an art and a science. While these principles provide a solid foundation, don't be afraid to experiment and develop your own style. Your garden should ultimately be a reflection of your personality and a space that brings you joy

Types of garden

Whether you have a balcony, an acre or anything in between, there are some specific garden designs you can use or combine to create the sort of look and theme that appeals to you. As previously discussed, some elements will be common to most types of garden, and the actual choice of plants will be governed by your taste and aims, but don't be afraid to mix and match styles, taking elements from each to create your perfect space.

Cottage

The traditional cottage garden is one of the most beloved garden styles, evoking images of quaint thatched houses surrounded by a vibrant mix of flowering plants. However, you don't need to live in a cottage or even the countryside to achieve this. With careful planning and plant selection, you can create a cottage-style garden in any setting, from urban terraces to suburban plots.

Use structures to add height and support climbing plants.

Key elements

✿ **Informal, mixed planting:** The heart of a cottage garden is its relaxed, abundant planting style. Mix shrubs, perennials, annuals, and edibles to create a lush, layered look

✿ **Traditional plants:** Classic cottage garden plants include roses,lavender delphiniums, and hollyhocks, but don't feel limited to traditional choices.

The original cottage gardens also included edibles. Peas will happily scramble up canes and look decorative as well as being productive

✿ **Vertical interest:** Use climbers and tall plants to add height and create a sense of enclosure.
✿ **Meandering paths:** If you have the space, incorporate winding paths made of stone, gravel, or grass to encourage exploration.
✿ **Structural elements:** Add features like arbours, arches, or a small pergola to provide structure and support for climbing plants.
✿ **Seating areas:** Include a bench or small seating area to enjoy your garden's sights and scents.

Attracting wildlife

Cottage gardens are perfect for supporting wildlife. Include single-flowered varieties to attract pollinators, add a small water feature, and consider installing bug hotels or bird boxes.

Maintenance tips

1. Regular deadheading will encourage continuous blooming.
2. Allow some plants to self-seed for that characteristic cottage garden charm.
3. Use mulch to suppress weeds and retain moisture.
4. Embrace a slightly untidy look – it's part of the cottage garden's charm!

Pair billowing Gypsophila with foxgloves for an informal look.

The key to a successful cottage garden is to create a space that feels personal and lived-in. Don't be afraid to mix and match plants; most importantly, fill your garden with plants you love. With time and care, your cottage garden will become a colourful, fragrant oasis

5 tips for... Maximising space

1. Choose compact varieties: Opt for smaller versions of traditional cottage garden plants. For example, try the Delphinium Magic Fountains Series instead of the taller varieties.

2. Use vertical space: Grow climbers like clematis or roses on walls, fences, or obelisks to maximise space.

3. Plant closely: In cottage gardens, plants are typically placed closer together than in other styles. This creates a lush, full look, even in a small area.

4. Container planting: Use pots and containers to add extra planting space and flexibility.

5. Limited colour palette: In smaller spaces, stick to a simple colour scheme for a more cohesive look.

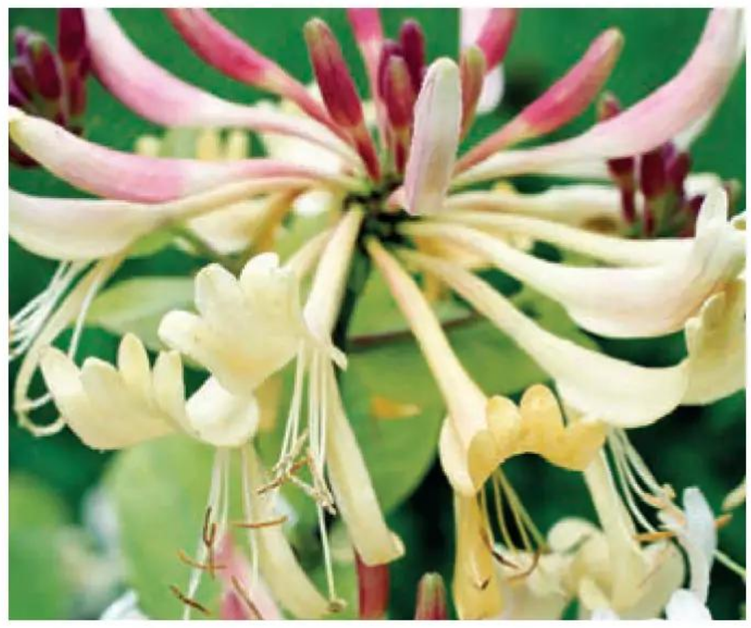
Seating can also add a pop of colour.

PLANTS FOR COTTAGE GARDENS

Geranium 'Rozanne' AGM: This hardy geranium produces azure-blue flowers from late May until the first frosts.

***Digitalis x mertonensis* AGM:** A foxglove with tall spires of strawberry sorbet-coloured flowers.

Erysimum 'Bowles's Mauve' AGM: This perennial wallflower blooms almost year-round with purple flowers.



***Lonicera periclymenum* 'Graham Thomas' AGM:** A fragrant creamy-white flowered honeysuckle

Philadelphus 'Manteau d'Hermine' AGM: A compact mock orange with sweetly scented white flowers.

***Aquilegia flabellata* var. *pumila* 'Atlantis':** A compact variety with distinctive two-toned flowers.

Types of garden – *Formal*

While cottage gardens charm with their informal beauty, formal gardens captivate with their structured elegance. A formal garden design brings a sense of order and sophistication to your outdoor space, whether you have a sprawling country estate or a modest urban plot. Whatever your situation, it's possible to create a formal garden that will impress year-round.

Key elements

✿ **Symmetry and balance:** The hallmark of formal gardens is their symmetrical layout. Create mirror-image plantings on either side of a central axis or focal point.

✿ **Geometric shapes:** Incorporate crisp, clean lines and geometric shapes in your garden design. Think square or rectangular lawns, circular flower beds, and straight paths.

Combine neat, low hedging with arches and focal points to create a formal feel.

✿ **Evergreen structure:** Use evergreen shrubs and trees to provide year-round structure and form the backbone of your garden.

✿ **Topiary:** Clipped hedges and topiary shapes add a classic formal touch. Box (*Buxus*) is traditional, but you can also use yew or privet.

✿ **Water features:** Formal fountains, reflecting pools, or geometric ponds add a sense of tranquillity and grandeur, even on a small scale.

✿ **Statuary and ornaments:** Carefully placed classical statues, urns, or sundials serve as focal points and add interest.

6 design strategies

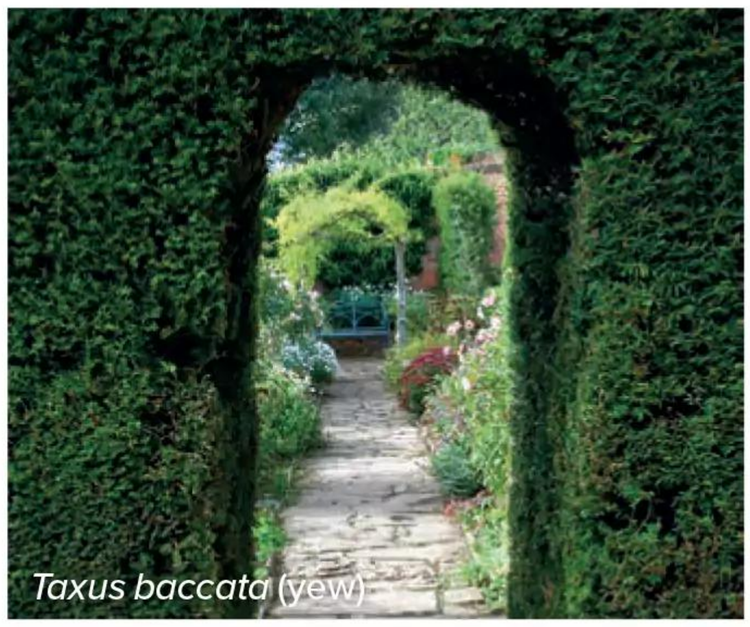
1. Create a central axis or focal point
2. Use hedging to define spaces and create 'rooms'
3. Incorporate straight paths and lawns in geometric shapes
4. Add formal water features like fountains or reflecting pools
5. Place statuary or ornaments as focal points
6. Use matching pairs of containers or plants to frame entrances or paths

In winter these pots will provide structure and form when the rest of the border has died back.

Did you know?

Traditional Box hedging is under threat from the Box-tree moth. Consider alternatives such as *Ilex crenata* (Japanese holly) or *Lonicera nitida* (Box honeysuckle)

PLANT CHOICES



Taxus baccata (yew)

✿ Trees

***Taxus baccata* (yew):** Excellent for creating large structural elements and topiary.
***Carpinus betulus* (hornbeam):** Perfect for pleaching or creating formal hedges.

Lavandula angustifolia (English lavender)

✿ Shrubs

***Buxus sempervirens* (Box):** Essential for hedging and intricate topiary shapes.
***Ilex crenata* (Japanese holly):** A good alternative to box for hedging.
***Lavandula angustifolia* (English lavender):** For fragrant, low hedging.

Hydrangea arborescens 'Annabelle'

✿ Perennials

Rosa 'Winchester Cathedral': A white shrub rose for formal rose gardens.
***Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle':** For large, structural white blooms.
Tulips: Plant in regimented rows or blocks for spring colour.

Wisteria sinensis

✿ Climbers

***Wisteria sinensis*:** For covering pergolas or walls with fragrant, cascading flowers.
***Parthenocissus tricuspidata* (Boston ivy):** For creating sleek green walls and vibrant autumn colour.

Practical tips

Planting and maintenance

1. Regular pruning is essential to maintain crisp shapes and prevent overgrowth.
2. Keep lawns well-mown with sharp edges for a manicured look.
3. Use mulch sparingly and neatly to maintain clean lines between plants and paths.
4. Consider installing an irrigation system to keep plants looking their best.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Use mirrors or stolen views to give the illusion of space or hidden areas

Space maximisation

1. Use miniature versions of formal elements in small spaces.
2. Incorporate vertical elements like obelisks or pleached trees.
3. Use visual tricks like mirrors to create the illusion of space.
4. Opt for dwarf varieties of traditional formal plants.

Adding personal touches

1. Choose a colour palette that complements your home's exterior.
2. Include a comfortable seating area to enjoy the garden.
3. Incorporate scented plants near seating areas.
4. Add subtle lighting to highlight key features and extend your use of the garden into the evening.

Creating a formal garden doesn't happen overnight. It takes time for plants to grow and fill out their designated spaces, so be patient, and enjoy the process.

Types of garden – *City*

Living in a town doesn't mean you have to compromise on the joys of gardening. With clever design and plant choices, you can create a stunning city garden that maximises limited growing space and provides a green oasis. In fact, towns often enjoy much milder weather than the countryside, allowing you to grow more exotic plants, like palms, citrus trees and tender perennials such as Canna lilies, Hedychium (Ginger lily) and Agapanthus (African lily).

Key elements

✿ **Multi-functional spaces:** Create areas that serve multiple purposes, such as a seating area with built-in storage.

✿ **Strong structure:** Incorporate hard landscaping elements like paving, decking, or gravel to create a low-maintenance framework.

✿ **Privacy screening:** Use tall plants or structures to create privacy from neighbouring properties.

✿ **Lighting:** Incorporate outdoor lighting to extend the use of your garden into the evening and create ambience.

✿ Focal points: Add eye-catching features like sculptures or water elements to draw attention and create visual interest.

✿ Climate control: Consider awnings or pergolas to provide shade and shelter, extending the usability of your outdoor space.

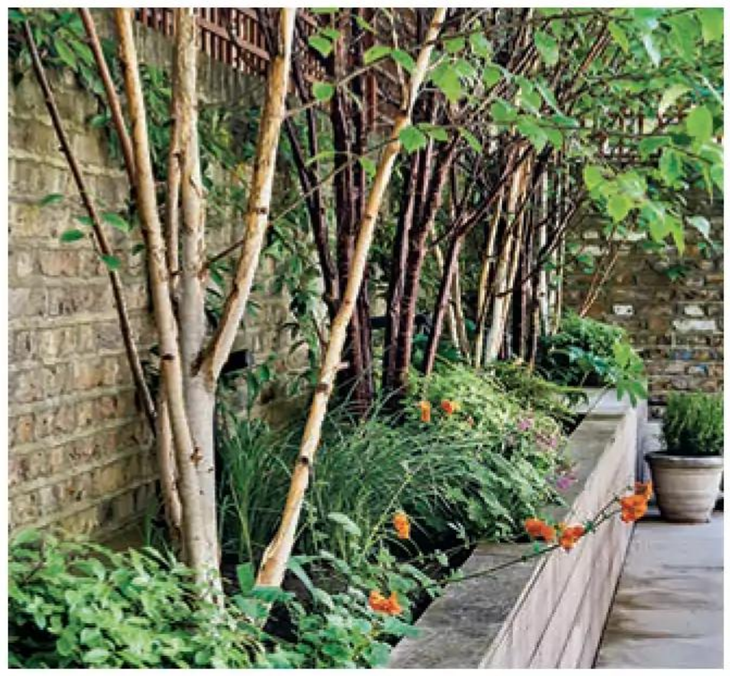
Even the smallest town garden can be turned into a relaxing, green space.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Dont' forget...
You can grow herbs, fruits, or vegetables in containers or raised beds

How to... Make the most of a small city garden

1. Create levels: Use raised beds, tiered planters, or a split-level design to add interest and the illusion of more space.
2. Use mirrors: Strategically place mirrors to make the garden appear larger and reflect light into shady areas.
3. Incorporate water: A small water feature can add a sense of tranquillity and mask traffic noise.
4. Go for a limited colour palette: A restrained colour scheme can make a small space feel more cohesive and less cluttered.
5. Utilise vertical space: Install trellises, or wall-mounted planters to maximise your growing area.



PLANT CHOICES

Amelanchier lamarckii (Juneberry)

Fuchsia 'Dollar Princess'

✿ Trees
***Acer palmatum* (Japanese Maple):** Compact varieties add elegant foliage interest.
***Amelanchier lamarckii* (Juneberry):** Multi-season interest with spring flowers, summer berries, and autumn colour.

✿ Shrubs
Fuchsia 'Dollar Princess': A hardy, compact shrub with long-lasting flowers.
***Skimmia japonica* 'Rubella':** An evergreen shrub with red buds for winter interest.

Heuchera

Trachelospermum jasminoides (Star Jasmine)

✿ Perennials
Heuchera: Colourful foliage plants that thrive in containers.
***Erigeron karvinskianus* (Mexican fleabane).** Tough, drought-tolerant and produces masses of daisy-like flowers from spring to autumn. It's perfect for paving cracks, walls, and containers.

✿ Climbers
***Trachelospermum jasminoides* (Star Jasmine):** A slow-growing, evergreen fragrant climber that's perfect for screening.
Clematis: Choose compact varieties for vertical interest. Plant different varieties to extend the flowering period.

Practical tips

Planting and maintenance
1. Choose compact, slow-growing plants to suit small spaces.
2. Use a watering can with a rose attachment for gentle, even watering.
3. Apply a layer of pebbles or bark chips to retain soil moisture.
4. Deadhead flowers regularly to encourage continuous blooming.

Space maximisation
1. Use windowsills for growing herbs or small flowers.
2. Install fold-down shelves on walls or fences for extra planting space.
3. Use hanging planters to add greenery without taking up floor space.
4. Consider a green roof on sheds or bin stores.

Adding personal touches
1. Incorporate sculptures or wall art to add personality.
2. Create a comfortable seating area for relaxation and entertaining.
3. Grow herbs, fruits, or vegetables in containers or raised beds.
4. Add bird feeders, bee hotels, or butterfly-attracting plants. Remember to leave a gap in any fences to allow hedgehogs to move from garden to garden.

A city garden is an extension of your living space. By carefully planning your design and plant choices, you can create a beautiful, functional outdoor area that provides a much-needed connection to nature.

Types of garden – *Low-maintenance*

For many gardeners, the dream is to have a beautiful outdoor space without spending every weekend tending to it. A low-maintenance garden allows you to enjoy the beauty without the fuss. You could choose to use hard-landscaping to reduce the amount of grass and flowerbeds, or to let your lawns and borders grow 'wild'. That doesn't mean they won't need any attention at all, but mowing will be less frequent, and pruning and weeding can be done on a more relaxed schedule. Whichever approach you take, some level of maintenance will still be necessary to keep your garden healthy and attractive, but the time and effort required will be significantly reduced.

Key elements

✿ **Strong structure**: Use hard landscaping to create a solid framework that requires minimal upkeep.

✿ **Simple design:** Opt for clean lines and a straightforward layout to reduce complexity.

✿ **Right plant, right place:** Choose plants suited to your garden's conditions to minimise care requirements and opt for shrubs, perennials and groundcover where possible.

✿ **Efficient watering:** Install irrigation systems or use drought-tolerant plants to reduce watering needs.

✿ **Mulching:** Use mulch to suppress weeds and retain moisture.

✿ **Limited lawn:** Reduce or eliminate lawn areas to cut down on mowing and maintenance.

The goal is to create create a space that allows you to spend more time enjoying your garden and less time working in it

SHUTTERSTOCK

Remember... A low-maintenance garden doesn't mean a no-maintenance garden. Some care will always be required, but with thoughtful design and plant choices, you can significantly reduce the time and effort needed to keep your garden looking great

Design elements for easy-care gardens

1. Incorporate patios or paths made of low-maintenance materials like York stone-effect paving.
2. Use raised beds with wooden surrounds to define planting areas and reduce bending.
3. Use gravel or slate chippings as an attractive, low-maintenance alternative to grass in some areas.
4. Incorporate gentle curves in your design to create a softer, more natural look that's easier to maintain than sharp corners.
5. Choose elements that serve multiple functions, like a birdbath that adds visual interest and attracts wildlife.

PLANT CHOICES

Magnolia stellata

Pyracantha

SHUTTERSTOCK

✿ Trees
Ornamental pear: Slow-growing and resistant to pests and diseases.
***Magnolia stellata*:** Compact size with beautiful spring flowers.

✿ Shrubs
***Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Silver Queen':** Evergreen with attractive foliage.
Escallonia: Tough, evergreen shrub with pink or white flowers.
Pyracantha: Offers year-round interest with flowers and berries.

Nepeta x faassenii (Catmint)

Rosa 'James Galway'

SHUTTERSTOCK

✿ Perennials
***Nepeta x faassenii* (Catmint):** Aromatic, drought-tolerant with lavender-blue flowers over a long period.
Heuchera: Attractive foliage in various colours, tolerates shade.
***Rudbeckia fulgida* 'Little Goldstar':** Compact variety with long-lasting flowers.

✿ Climbers
Rosa 'James Galway': Repeat-flowering climbing rose with minimal pruning needs.
***Clematis montana*:** Vigorous and easy to grow, with masses of spring flowers.

Practical tips

Planting and maintenance
1. Group plants with similar water and care needs together.
2. Use slow-release fertilisers to reduce feeding frequency.
3. Install automatic irrigation systems or use self-watering containers.
4. Choose disease-resistant plant varieties to minimise pest and disease issues.
5. Use groundcover plants or mulch to suppress weeds in borders.

Space maximisation
1. Use vertical planting to make the most of wall and fence space.
2. Incorporate multi-functional elements like seating with built-in storage.
3. Choose compact or dwarf varieties of plants to fit more into small spaces.
4. Use containers for flexibility and to add interest to paved areas.

Adding interest without adding work
1. Use statuary, large pots, or architectural plants as low-maintenance focal points.
2. Install solar-powered lights for evening ambiance without extra wiring or maintenance.
3. Consider a small, self-contained water feature for added interest.
4. Incorporate features like bird baths or insect hotels to encourage biodiversity.

Types of garden – *Small space*

Having limited outdoor space doesn't mean you can't enjoy gardening. With clever planning and the right plant choices, you can transform even the tiniest balcony or patio into a lush, beautiful garden – just on a smaller scale. Keeping to one colour palette will give the illusion of more space, or you can let your imagination run wild and use brightly coloured flowers, vegetables, fruit and herbs in a glorious technicolour explosion!

Key strategies

✿ **Vertical gardening:** Use walls, fences, and trellises to grow plants upwards, maximising your limited ground space.

✿ **Container planting:** Pots, hanging baskets, and window boxes add flexibility and variety to your garden.

✿ **Multi-functional elements:** Choose furniture and features that serve multiple purposes, such as storage benches or a table that can double as a potting surface.

✿ **Clever layout:** Create zones for different activities (eg, seating, growing, storage) to make the space feel larger and more functional.

✿ **Optical illusions:** Use mirrors or reflective surfaces to create the illusion of more space and light.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Design elements for small spaces

1. Tiered planters: Use plant stands or shelving to create vertical interest and increase planting area.

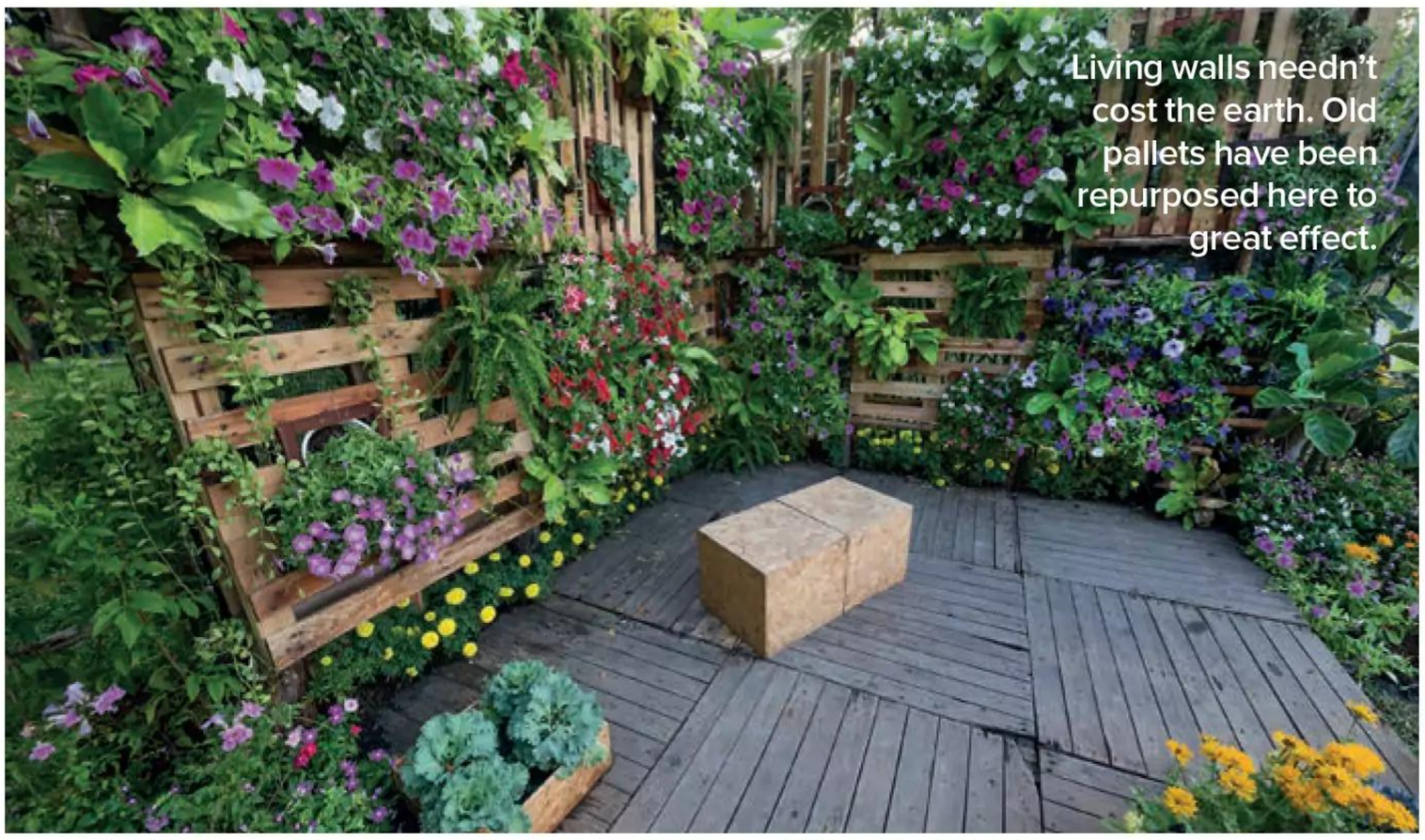
2. Living walls: Install a vertical planting system for a stunning green backdrop that doesn't take up floor space.

3. Folding or stackable furniture: This allows you to adjust your space for different needs.

4. Raised beds: Even a small raised bed can provide ample growing space for herbs or vegetables.

5. Water features: A small, self-contained water feature can add a sense of tranquillity and mask urban noise.

SHUTTERSTOCK


Living walls needn't cost the earth. Old pallets have been repurposed here to great effect.

PLANT CHOICES

Acer palmatum (Japanese Maple)

✿ Trees (for larger patios)

***Acer palmatum* (Japanese Maple):** Compact varieties for elegant foliage interest.

***Malus* 'Evereste' (Crab apple):** For spring blossom and autumn fruit.

Skimmia japonica 'Rubella'

✿ Shrubs

Fuchsia' Dollar Princess': A compact, hardy shrub with long-lasting flowers.

***Skimmia japonica* 'Rubella':** An evergreen shrub with red buds for winter interest.

Rudbeckia fulgida 'Little Goldstar'

SHUTTERSTOCK

✿ Perennials

Heuchera: Colourful foliage plants that thrive in containers.

***Rudbeckia fulgida* 'Little Goldstar':** Compact variety with long-lasting flowers.

Akebia quinata (Chocolate vine)

✿ Climbers

Clematis 'Nelly Moser' or 'Mayleen': For vertical interest and beautiful flowers.

***Akebia quinata*:** Chocolate scented, exotic flowers, semi-evergreen.

Practical tips

Planting and maintenance

1. Use high-quality, peat-free potting compost for container plants.
2. Group plants with similar water and sunlight needs together.
3. Water regularly, as containers can dry out very quickly
4. Feed container plants regularly during the growing season.
5. Deadhead and prune to keep plants compact and encourage more blooms.

Space maximisation

1. Attach window boxes or railing planters to make the most of every inch of space.
2. Choose miniature varieties of plants, including dwarf fruit trees.
3. Turn containers regularly to ensure even growth and prevent plants from reaching towards the light.
4. Use lightweight containers if weight is a concern, especially on balconies.

Adding personal touches

1. Use solar-powered or battery-operated lights to create ambience without the need for wiring.
2. Define a seating area and add comfort with an outdoor rug.
3. Define your seating area and add comfort underfoot with an outdoor rug.
4. Add screening for privacy and wind protection, but be carefeul not to block light. Most plants need six hours a day of sunshine. If your space is shady, there are plenty of options for both flowers and edible plants.

Small-space gardening is all about creativity and making the most of what you have. With careful planning and the right plant choices, even the tiniest balcony or patio can become a lush, inviting outdoor retreat. Embrace the challenge of your small space and let your imagination run wild.

Don't be afraid to move plants if they're not thriving in their current location. Remember that gardens evolve over time – it's all part of the joy of growing!

Choosing plants

Selecting the right plants for your garden is crucial in creating a thriving, beautiful outdoor space. With so many options available for beginners, it's important to consider factors such as your garden's conditions, personal preferences, and the plants' characteristics.

When planning your garden, consider including a variety of plant types for different purposes. You can give each its own area or combine them. Some vegetables can add structure, interest and colour to your flowerbeds. Cardoons have the most amazing architectural form, rainbow chard displays vibrant colours and dill is feathered elegance personified!

Many of the herbs we use originate from the Mediterranean, meaning they are drought-tolerant and low maintenance. Marjoram, oregano, or thyme edges to your borders will attract pollinators and provide delicious seasoning in the kitchen.

Starting your plant collection

If you're new to gardening, it's often best to start small and gradually expand your plant collection. There's no getting around the fact that mature plants are expensive. One cost-effective way to mitigate this is to start with just a few large plants, surround them with annuals for the first year, and learn how to take cuttings, collect seed and propagate your own new plants.

Small plants, like these hollyhocks, are cheaper than mature plants, and will soon catch up.

5 top tips

1. Begin with easy-to-grow, robust plants to build your confidence.
2. Visit local gardens, nurseries, and garden centres for inspiration and advice.
3. Talk to experienced gardeners in your area about what grows well locally.
4. Experiment with a mix of annuals and perennials to see what you enjoy growing.
5. Keep a garden journal to record what works well and what doesn't.

It's not a case of the bigger the plant, the better either. Smaller plants, which are cheaper to buy, often establish more quickly than larger ones. This is because they experience less transplant shock and can adapt more easily to their new environment. Younger, smaller plants tend to develop new roots more quickly, too. Their root systems are more adaptable and can quickly spread into the surrounding soil, allowing them to access water and nutrients more efficiently. Once established, they often have a higher relative growth rate compared to mature plants, meaning they can catch up in size relatively quickly.

For most people, flowers are the name of the game, particularly when they're starting out. Flowers add colour, fragrance, and beauty to gardens, and many also support pollinators. One of the first distinctions to understand when choosing plants is the difference between annuals and perennials.

Benefits of small plants

✿ **Cost-effectiveness:** Smaller plants are usually less expensive, allowing gardeners to buy more plants for the same budget, potentially creating a fuller garden more quickly.

✿ **Ease of planting:** Smaller plants are easier to handle and plant, reducing the risk of damage during the planting process.

✿ **Adaptability:** Younger plants can often adapt better to local conditions, potentially leading to healthier, more robust plants in the long term.

✿ **Seasonal considerations:** In many cases, smaller plants can be planted later in the season and still establish well before winter, whereas larger plants might struggle if not planted early enough.

That said, there are some benefits to starting with big plants. For very slow-growing plants, starting with a larger specimen will provide a more immediate impact. Larger specimens might have an advantage in areas with heavy weed pressure or strong competition from established plants.

Top tip

Sunlight needs vary greatly between plants. Some thrive in full sun, while others prefer shade. Check mature sizes before buying to ensure plants won't outgrow their space

Annuals

Annual plants complete their entire life cycle – from seed to flower to seed – in one growing season. After producing seeds, the plant dies. Annuals used to be associated with municipal bedding plant displays, but there is so much more to them than that!

Advantages

1. Quick growth and lots of flowers.
2. Flexibility to change your garden design each year.
3. Often have longer blooming periods than perennials.
4. Some will self-seed and reappear the following year.
5. Great for filling gaps in gardens or containers.

Disadvantages

1. Need to be replanted each year, which can be time-consuming and costly.
2. May require more frequent watering and fertilising.

SHUTTERSTOCK

POPULAR ANNUALS

Sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*): Fragrant climbing annuals

Marigolds (*Tagetes*): Bright, long-lasting blooms

Cosmos: Delicate flowers in shades of pink, white, and red

Poppies (*Papaver*): Vibrant, papery blooms in various colours

Love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*): Whimsical blue flowers with ferny foliage

Sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*): Tall plants with large, cheerful blooms

Perennials

Perennial plants live for more than two years, often dying back in winter and regrowing in spring.

Advantages

1. Come back year after year, saving time and money on replanting.
2. Often require less maintenance once established.
3. Many are drought-tolerant.
4. Provide structure to the garden year-round.

Disadvantages

1. May have shorter flowering periods.
2. Can take a few years to reach full size and maximum impact.
3. Some may need dividing every few years to maintain vigour.

Many people opt for a mix of annuals and perennials, combining the reliability and structure of perennials with the vibrant, changeable nature of annuals.

When choosing, consider factors like flowering time, height, and colour to create a garden with interest throughout the seasons.

ALAMY

POPULAR PERENNIALS

Lavender: Fragrant, drought-tolerant shrub

Daylilies (*Hemerocallis*): Reliable, long-flowering perennials

Hostas: Shade-loving plants prized for their foliage

***Alchemilla mollis* (Lady's mantle):** Soft green leaves with frothy flowers

Lupins: Tall spikes of pea-like flowers in various colours

Geraniums (*Cranesbills*): Hardy, long-blooming ground cover

Roses

Most garden styles will include roses, and these woody perennial flowering plants are prized for their beauty and fragrance. They come in various forms, including climbers, shrubs, and patio varieties.

Advantages

1. Long-lived plants that can bloom for many years.
2. Wide range of colours, sizes, and growth habits.
3. Many varieties flower repeatedly through the season.
4. Fragrant blooms add sensory appeal to gardens.
5. Can be used in various garden settings, from formal to cottage-style.

Disadvantages

1. Some varieties can be prone to diseases like black spot and powdery mildew.
2. Many require regular pruning and care for optimal performance.
3. Some types can be thorny, making maintenance challenging.

CLIMBERS

'Climbing Iceberg': Clusters of white flowers, repeat-flowering

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Gertrude Jekyll': Strong old rose fragrance with pink blooms

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Golden Showers': Large, fragrant yellow flowers

SHRUB

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Graham Thomas': Rich yellow flowers with a tea rose scent

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Munstead Wood': Deep crimson blooms with a strong Old Rose fragrance

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Queen Elizabeth': Clear pink flowers, excellent disease resistance

PATIO/CONTAINER

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Raspberry Royale': Clusters of deep pink to raspberry-red flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Sweet Dream': Apricot-yellow blooms, ideal for containers

SHUTTERSTOCK

'Flower Carpet Red': Low-growing with masses of red flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

Don't be discouraged if native plants take time to establish. They often focus on root growth initially, which leads to stronger, more resilient plants in the long run. Patience pays off!

Native plants

Native plants occur naturally in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat without human introduction. These plants have evolved over thousands of years to thrive in local conditions, and can be used to great effect in gardens. They are well-adapted to local climate, soil types, and rainfall patterns, making them generally easier to grow and maintain. They also play a crucial role in supporting local wildlife, providing food and shelter for birds, insects, and other creatures. Consider having an area of these plants devoted to wildlife or use them at the edges of your garden, to gently blend the 'managed' feel into one that's slightly less tame and helps the ecological balance in your garden.

Benefits

1. **Adapted to local conditions:** Native plants are well-suited to your area's climate, soil, and rainfall patterns, often requiring less water and maintenance once established.
2. **Support local wildlife:** Native plants provide food and habitat for local insects, birds, and other wildlife. For example, many native butterfly species rely on specific native plants for food and breeding.
3. **Preserve local ecosystems:** By planting natives, you're helping to maintain the ecological balance of your local area.
4. **Low maintenance:** Once established, native plants often require less watering, fertilising, and pest control than non-native species.
5. **Drought resistance:** Many native plants have deep root systems that help them withstand periods of drought.
6. **Soil improvement:** Native plants can help prevent erosion and improve soil structure.
7. **Seasonal interest:** Native plants often provide year-round interest, with different species flowering, fruiting, or changing colour at various times.
8. **Educational value:** Growing native plants can be an excellent way to learn about local ecosystems and natural history.

Did you know?

The UK has over 1,500 native plant species, ranging from tiny wildflowers to mighty oaks. Many of these plants have fascinating folklore attached to them. For instance, the oak was sacred to the Druids, while foxgloves were believed to be favoured by fairies

SHADE

Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*): Tall spikes of tubular flowers, excellent for adding height and drama.

Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*): Charming early spring flowers, perfect for woodland gardens or shady borders.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Common violet (*Viola riviniana*): Delicate purple flowers, excellent as ground cover in shady areas.

Red campion (*Silene dioica*): Bright pink flowers that add colour to partially shaded areas.

Wild garlic (*Allium ursinum*): Attractive white flowers and edible leaves, good for shady spots.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*): Beautiful blue flowers in spring, ideal for naturalising under trees.

SUN

Ox-eye daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*): Classic white daisy flowers, great for sunny borders or meadow-style plantings.

Cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*): Vibrant blue flowers, perfect for sunny borders or wildflower meadows.

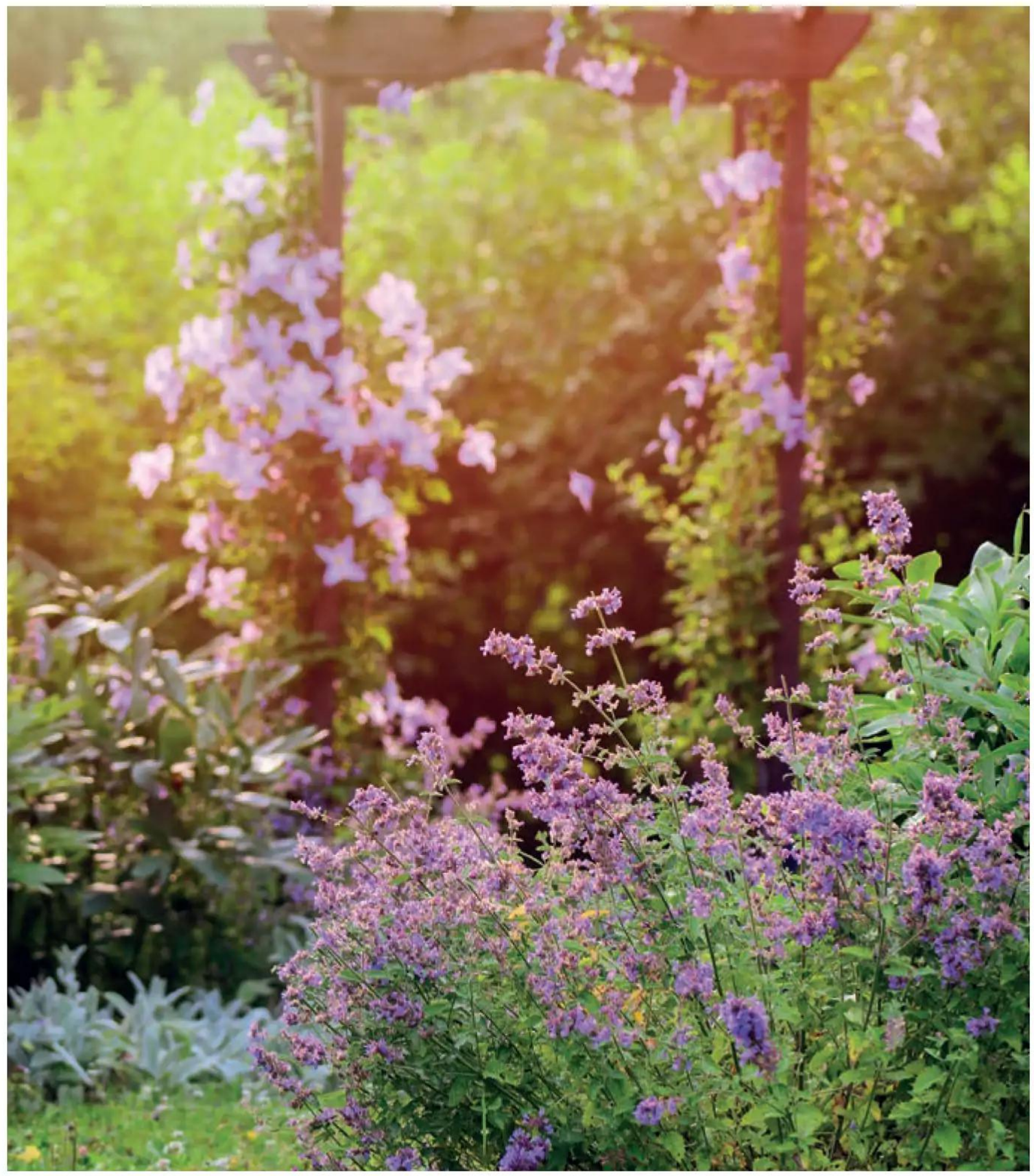
Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*): Fragrant climbing plant, great for covering fences or pergolas.

When selecting native plants, it's important to choose species that are suited to your specific garden conditions. Some natives prefer sunny spots, while others thrive in shade or damp conditions

Shrubs

Shrubs are woody, perennial plants that form the backbone of many gardens. Typically smaller than trees but larger than herbaceous plants, shrubs are characterised by multiple stems growing from the base. They can be deciduous, losing their leaves in winter, or evergreen, providing year-round structure and interest.

These versatile plants play many roles in garden design. Taller varieties create excellent backdrops in beds and borders, adding height, form, and often seasonal interest with flowers, berries, or autumn foliage. Compact shrubs make striking specimen plants, focal points, or low-maintenance fillers in mixed plantings. Many shrubs also serve practical purposes, offering screening, windbreaks, or habitat for wildlife.



SHUTTERSTOCK

These options are generally hardy, relatively low-maintenance, and suitable for various garden conditions in the UK. They're good choices for beginners as they're forgiving of minor mistakes in care and can thrive with basic attention

EASY-CARE SHRUBS

***Buddleja davidii* (Butterfly bush)** Easy to grow, attracts butterflies. Flowers in summer, various colours available. Tolerates most soil types.

ALAMY

***Hydrangea macrophylla* ('Lanarth White' AGM shown)** Large flowerheads. Thrives in partial shade. Flower colour can change based on soil pH.

Escallonia Evergreen with pink or white flowers. Good for hedging or as a standalone shrub. Tolerates coastal conditions.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Viburnum tinus
Evergreen with white flowers in winter/spring. Tolerates shade and most soil types. Low maintenance.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Choisya ternata* (Mexican orange blossom)** Evergreen with fragrant white flowers. Tolerates partial shade. Relatively pest-free.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin'**
Evergreen with bright red new growth. Good for hedging or as a specimen plant. Tolerates most soil types.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Spiraea japonica
Deciduous with pink or white flowers in summer. Compact and easy to maintain. Tolerates a range of soil conditions.

Forsythia
Deciduous with bright yellow flowers in early spring. Fast-growing and easy to prune. Tolerates most soil types.

ALAMY

***Ribes sanguineum* (Flowering currant)**
Deciduous with pink flowers in spring. Attracts wildlife. Tolerates partial shade and most soil types.

If you have the space, don't be afraid to plant several different varieties of the same plant all together in one bed for mass impact, like these azaleas

Small trees

Trees that only reach 6-10 metres (20-35 feet) at maturity are classed as 'small', and they offer many of the benefits of their larger counterparts but in a scale suitable for smaller spaces, urban gardens, and even large containers.

They make excellent focal points, providing vertical interest and a sense of maturity to gardens and can be used to create privacy, frame views, or provide dappled shade for underplanting. Many of them offer multiple seasons of interest, from spring blossoms and summer foliage to autumn colour and winter bark or berries.

Small trees are particularly valuable in urban and suburban settings where space is at a premium. They can soften the lines of buildings and hard landscaping, create wildlife habitats, and even help mitigate the urban heat island effect. From flowering cherries and magnolias to evergreen hollies and colourful Japanese maples, there's a small tree to suit every garden style and situation.

SHUTTERSTOCK

SPRING INTEREST

***Magnolia stellata* (Star magnolia)** White star-shaped flowers in early spring. Compact form suitable for small gardens. Prefers acidic soil but will tolerate neutral conditions

ALAMY

Malus (Crab apple) Spring blossom and autumn fruit. Many compact varieties available. Attracts wildlife

Prunus 'Amanogawa' (Flagpole cherry) Narrow, upright form suitable for small spaces. Pink blossom in spring, autumn colour. Low maintenance

YEAR-ROUND INTEREST

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Sorbus aucuparia* (Rowan)**
White flowers in spring, red berries in autumn. Good for wildlife. Tolerates most soil types and exposed sites

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Cornus kousa* (Kousa Dogwood)**
White bracts in late spring, strawberry-like fruits. Good autumn colour. Prefers well-drained soil

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' (Redbud)** Heart-shaped purple leaves. Pink flowers in spring, autumn colour. Prefers a sheltered position

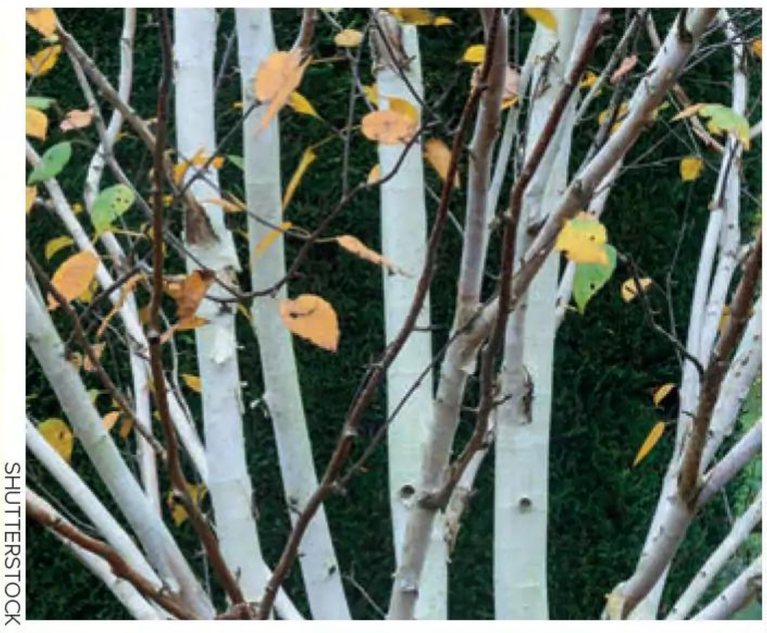
INTERESTING BARK

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Prunus serrula* (Tibetan cherry)**
Glossy, copper-red bark peels in attractive layers. Small white flowers in spring. Golden leaves in autumn. Prefers well-drained soil in full sun.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Parrotia persica (Persian Ironwood)
Flaking bark reveals a mosaic of green, cream, and brown patches. Small red flowers in late winter. Green leaves turn to brilliant yellow, orange, and red in autumn. Tolerates most well-drained soils. Slow-growing, reaching 6-8 metres.


SHUTTERSTOCK

***Betula utilis var. jacquemontii* (Himalayan birch)**
White bark provides year-round interest. Yellow leaves in autumn. Tolerates most soil types. Elegant catkins appear in spring. Suitable for medium to large gardens. Prefers full sun but can tolerate light shade.

Group trees together to mimic nature, creating a layered, natural look. Silver birches work well in clusters for a woodland feel

Evergreens

Evergreen plants retain their leaves or needles year-round, providing constant colour and structure in the garden. They contrast well with other plants when used as a backdrop and are suitable for a number of different garden situations, from hedging and specimen plants to ground cover. You could either choose to make a completely evergreen garden, carefully place specimen plants for maximum impact, or anything in between.

Advantages

1. Provide year-round interest and structure.
2. Offer privacy and screening.
3. Many are low-maintenance once established.
4. Can act as windbreaks and noise barriers.
5. Suitable for hedging and topiary.

Disadvantages

1. Some can grow quite large and may need regular pruning.
2. Slower growing than many deciduous plants.
3. May create dense shade, limiting underplanting options.
4. Some varieties can be susceptible to specific pests or diseases.

SHRUBS

***Aucuba japonica* (Spotted Laurel):** Glossy leaves, tolerates shade

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Fatsia japonica*:** Large, tropical-looking leaves, good for shady spots

Mahonia x media: Spiky leaves, yellow flowers in winter, blue-black berries

CONIFERS

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Pinus mugo* (Dwarf mountain pine):** Compact, mound-forming conifer

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Cryptomeria japonica* 'Globosa Nana':** Dwarf Japanese cedar, feathery foliage

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star':** Low-growing with silvery-blue foliage

GROUND COVER

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Gaultheria procumbens* (Checkerberry):** Low-growing

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Iberis sempervirens* (Perennial candytuft):** White flowers in spring

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Bergenia cordifolia* (Elephant's ears):** Large, leathery leaves

Grasses

These ornamental grasses offer a range of heights, textures, and colours to suit various garden situations. They're generally easy to grow and maintain, making them suitable for both beginners and experienced gardeners. Many of these grasses also provide excellent wildlife habitats and food sources.

Advantages

1. Provide structure and movement in the garden.
2. Many are low-maintenance once established.
3. Offer winter interest with attractive seedheads.
4. Drought-tolerant once established.
5. Can be used in various garden styles, from modern to naturalistic.

Disadvantages

1. Some varieties can self-seed and become invasive.
2. Many need cutting back annually.
3. Some larger varieties may need dividing every few years.
4. Not all are evergreen, so some may look untidy in winter.

TALL

SHUTTERSTOCK

Miscanthus 'Morning Light': Reddish plumes, turning silvery

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind':** Upright blue-green foliage, airy flowerheads

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster':** Vertical habit, feathery flowerheads

MEDIUM

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln':** Fountain-like habit, fluffy flowerheads

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Molinia caerulea subsp. arundinacea* 'Transparent':** Golden autumn colour

SHUTTERSTOCK

Sesleria autumnalis: Evergreen with slender leaves and silvery flowerheads

LOW

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Festuca glauca* 'Elijah Blue':** Compact mounds of blue-grey foliage

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola'**: Golden variegated leaves, ideal for shade

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold':** Evergreen sedge with striped leaves

Bulbs

One of the easiest ways to introduce low-maintenance colour into the garden is with bulbs. From the first crocuses in late winter, to daffodils and tulips in spring, and alliums in early summer, bulbs provide a succession of blooms that brighten the garden year after year.

Advantages

1. Easy to plant and require minimal maintenance.
2. Many naturalise and multiply over time.
3. Can be planted in layers for successive blooming.
4. Suitable for both garden beds and containers.
5. Most return year after year with little effort.

Disadvantages

1. Foliage must be left to die back naturally, which can look untidy.
2. Some may need lifting and storing over winter.
3. Can be prone to damage from pests like squirrels or mice.

SPRING-FLOWERING

SHUTTERSTOCK

Narcissus 'Tête-à-tête': Miniature daffodil, perfect for pots or borders

SHUTTERSTOCK

Tulipa 'Queen of Night': Deep purple tulip, elegant in borders

***Muscari armeniacum*:** Grape hyacinth, great for naturalising

SUMMER-FLOWERING

SHUTTERSTOCK

Allium 'Purple Sensation': Ornamental onion with globe-shaped purple flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Lilium regale*:** Regal lily, fragrant white trumpets with pink flush

SHUTTERSTOCK

Gladiolus 'The Bride': Elegant white flowers, good for cutting

AUTUMN/WINTER-FLOWERING

ALAMY

***Crocus speciosus*:** Autumn crocus with delicate purple flowers

ALAMY

***Cyclamen hederifolium*:** Hardy cyclamen with marbled leaves and pink flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Galanthus nivalis*:** Snowdrops, one of the earliest bulbs to flower in late winter

Growing from seed is a budget-friendly way to fill your garden, giving you far more plants than you'd get by buying mature ones. It's also rewarding to grow plants right from the start

Plant basics

Once you've chosen your plants, it's time to get them in the ground. Understanding the basics of planting is crucial for giving your plants the best start in life. There are some key aspects of planting that will help, from interpreting seed packets and plant labels to mastering proper planting techniques and successfully transplanting seedlings. The same applies for both flowers and vegetables.

Reading seed packets and plant labels

Seed packets and plant labels contain vital information to help you successfully grow and care for your plants. Understanding how to interpret this information is an essential skill for any gardener.

Seed packets

Seed packets typically include the following information:

✿ **Plant name:** Both the common name and scientific name (genus and species) are usually provided.

✿ **Plant description:** This often includes expected height, flower colour, and any unique characteristics.

✿ **Sowing instructions:**
- When to sow (indoors and/or outdoors)
- Sowing depth
- Spacing between seeds and rows
- Germination time

✿ **Growing conditions:**
- Light requirements (full sun, partial shade, full shade)
- Soil preferences
- Water needs

✿ **Days to maturity:** For vegetables, this indicates how long it takes from sowing to harvest.

✿ **Hardiness information:** This may include the plant's tolerance to frost or heat.

✿ **Packet date:** Check this to ensure the seeds are fresh.

Plant labels

Plant labels for seedlings or mature plants often include:

✿ **Plant name:** Common and scientific names.

✿ **Mature size:** Expected height and spread.

✿ **Hardiness zone:** The range of minimum winter temperatures the plant can tolerate.

✿ **Light requirements:** Usually indicated by sun symbols.

✿ **Water needs:** Often shown with water droplet symbols.

✿ **Blooming period:** For flowering plants.

✿ **Special features:** Such as drought tolerance or attractiveness to pollinators.

Remember... Remember to check seed packets for specific requirements, as some seeds have unique needs for light, temperature, or pre-treatment. Always harden off indoor-sown seedlings gradually before planting them outdoors

Seeds

Sowing seeds outdoors

1. Remove weeds and rocks, then rake the soil to a fine tilth (a smooth, crumbly texture).

2. Use the information on the seed packet to space seeds correctly. This ensures plants have enough room to grow without competing for resources.
3. A general rule is to plant seeds at a depth of about twice their diameter. However, always check the seed packet for specific instructions.
4. Use a fine spray to avoid displacing seeds. Keep the soil consistently moist but not waterlogged until germination occurs.
5. Use plant markers to remember what you've sown where.
6. Once seedlings have their first true leaves, thin them according to the packet instructions to prevent overcrowding.

Sowing seeds indoors

1. Use clean seed trays, small pots, or biodegradable containers. Ensure they have drainage holes.
2. Fill containers with a sterile, well-draining seed-starting compost. For very fine seeds, consider adding a layer of vermiculite on top, which helps retain moisture.
3. Water the compost before sowing to ensure even moisture. It should be damp but not waterlogged.
4. Follow packet instructions for spacing and depth. Some seeds need light to germinate and should be pressed gently onto the surface without covering.
5. For seeds that need darkness, cover lightly with the compost or vermiculite.

For larger seeds, a layer of horticultural grit can help prevent damping off

6. Use plastic wrap or a propagator lid to maintain humidity. Remove once seedlings emerge.
7. Place containers in a warm location or use a heat mat to encourage germination.
8. Once germinated, provide ample light. A sunny windowsill or grow lights work well, especially for seedlings that germinated in darkness.
9. Use a fine mist spray or water from below to avoid disturbing seeds. Keep soil consistently moist.
10. Mark containers with plant names and sowing dates.
11. Once seedlings have their first true leaves, thin or transplant them to give each plant enough space to grow.

Did you know? When seeds germinate, the first set of leaves is called the cotyledons and they provide initial nutrients for seedling growth. These 'seed leaves' are often different in shape from the plant's true leaves, which can be seen here just emerging from the centre. Use the cotyledons to handle the seedling when pricking out or transplanting

Damping off

Damping off is a common problem when starting seeds indoors. It's a fungal disease that affects seedlings, causing them to suddenly wilt and die, often with a characteristic constriction at the stem near soil level.

Causes

- Overly wet soil
- Poor air circulation
- Cool temperatures
- Contaminated soil or containers
- Use of unclean water

Prevention

1. Use sterile seed-starting mix and clean containers.
2. Avoid overwatering; keep soil moist but not waterlogged.
3. Ensure good air circulation around seedlings.
4. Maintain warm soil temperatures for quick germination.
5. Apply a thin layer of fine grit or sand on the soil surface after sowing.
6. Use clean, room-temperature water. Rainwater or tap water left to stand overnight (to allow chlorine to dissipate) are good options.
7. Some gardeners use a weak chamomile tea solution to water seedlings, as it has natural anti-fungal properties.

If damping off occurs, remove the affected seedlings immediately to prevent spread. While there's no cure once it starts, good preventive practices can significantly reduce the risk of this problem.

Hardening off

'Hardening off' is also something you may see on seed packets, and they usually give instructions on how and when to do this. It's the process of gradually acclimating indoor-grown seedlings or tender plants to outdoor conditions. This crucial step helps plants adjust to direct sunlight, wind, and temperature fluctuations.

Process

1. Begin 7-14 days before transplanting outdoors.
2. Start by placing plants outside in a sheltered, shaded area for 1-2 hours. A cold frame is ideal for this, but any sheltered area is fine.
3. Gradually increase the outdoor time and exposure to sunlight over the next week or two.
4. Bring plants indoors or protect them if frost is forecast.
5. Towards the end of the process, leave plants out overnight if temperatures permit.
6. Water plants more frequently during this time, as they'll dry out faster outdoors.

Always harden off indoor-sown seedlings gradually before planting them outdoors

OVERWINTERING IN COLD FRAMES

Some seed packets mention 'overwintering in a cold frame'. But what does that mean? Cold frames are unheated outdoor structures with transparent tops that protect plants from harsh weather conditions. They're excellent for keeping tender perennials and semi-hardy plants in over the winter, hardening off young plants or extending the growing season.

If you want to get a good headstart on the next growing season, some seeds can be sown in the autumn, then protected in a cold frame over the winter so when you plant them in the spring, they're ready to go and will reach maturity earlier than the same seeds sown the following spring. If you want to use 'successional sowing' (see page 51), overwintering suitable plants is a good way to get your first batch of mature plants.

Using cold frames for overwintering

1. Position the cold frame in a sheltered, sunny spot.
2. Ensure good drainage by raising the frame slightly or adding gravel beneath.
3. Place plants inside before the first hard frost.
4. Water sparingly; plants need less water when dormant.
5. Ventilate on sunny days to prevent overheating and reduce humidity.
6. Insulate with straw or bubble wrap on very cold nights.
7. Monitor for pests and diseases regularly.
8. Begin acclimatising plants to outdoor conditions in spring by gradually increasing ventilation.

Use a simple prop to ventilate cold frames on sunny days, allowing air to circulate and prevent overheating. Proper airflow keeps plants healthy

SHUTTERSTOCK

DIY COLD FRAME

SHUTTERSTOCK

Purpose-built cold frames can be expensive, but they're easy to make from recycled materials

Materials needed

- Old window(s)
- Bricks (enough to create a frame)
- Sand or gravel for levelling
- Wooden battens (optional, for securing the window)

Steps

1. Select a sunny, well-drained spot with some protection from strong winds.
2. Clear the area and level it. Add a layer of sand or gravel for drainage if needed.
3. Lay out bricks to form a rectangle slightly smaller than your window. The back should be higher than the front for better sun exposure and water runoff.
4. Stack the bricks to create the frame. For stability, you can use a dry-stack method (no mortar) or mortar the bricks together for a more permanent structure.
5. Build the back wall higher than the front. A good rule of thumb is to make the back about 15-20cm (6-8 inches) higher than the front for every 1m (3 feet) of frame length. Remember to make sure it's tall enough for your plants! You can always add more bricks if the plants continue to grow in mild weather.
6. Place the old window on top of the brick frame. If it's a good fit, the weight of the window might be enough to keep it in place.
7. If needed, add wooden battens to the inside of the brick frame for the window to rest on. This can help prevent the window from sliding off.
8. Use a sturdy stick or old broom handle as a prop to hold the window open for ventilation.

- Use multiple windows for a larger cold frame.
- Consider adding a layer of insulation (like bubble wrap) to the inside of the window for extra warmth.
- Ensure there are no sharp edges on the window that could cause injury.
- If your window doesn't have a frame, you may need to create one or use a different method to secure it.
- Be very careful using glass in the garden. Make sure pets and children don't fall through it.

SUCCESSIONAL SOWING

Successional sowing is a technique that involves sowing and then planting small batches of flowers at regular intervals rather than all at once. This ensures a continuous display of flowers throughout the growing season, providing constant colour and interest.

Why use successional sowing for flowers?

✔ Extends the flowering period
✔ Provides a constant supply of cut flowers
✔ Maintains visual interest in the garden
✔ Maximises use of garden space

Successional sowing with flowers

✿ **Choose suitable flowers:** Fast-growing annuals like cosmos, night-scented stock, calendula, zinnias, and sweet peas are ideal for succession planting.
✿ **Determine intervals:** Typically, sow a new batch every 2-4 weeks, adjusting this based on the flower type and when you want the flowers.
✿ **Start small:** Begin with a small area or a few pots for each sowing.
✿ **Keep records:** Note sowing dates to help plan future plantings and track which varieties perform best.
✿ **Consider the season:** Adjust sowing frequency based on the time of year. Sow more frequently in spring and early summer, less often as autumn approaches.
✿ **Use different varieties:** Plant early, mid-season, and late varieties to further extend the flowering period.

Top tips

- Start with just one or two flower types to get familiar with the technique.
- Prepare new planting areas or pots for each succession.
- Use markers or labels to keep track of different plantings.
- Deadhead regularly to encourage continuous blooming.
- Consider sowing some flowers directly outdoors and others indoors for transplanting, to stagger bloom times.

Example schedule for sweet peas

Autumn sowing (for earlier flowers)
✿ **Mid-October to early November:** Sow in pots or root trainers. Keep in a cold frame or unheated greenhouse over winter.
Spring sowings
✿ **Late January to early February:** Sow indoors for early summer blooms.
✿ **Mid-March:** Sow directly outdoors or in pots for transplanting.
✿ **Mid-April:** Second outdoor sowing.
✿ **Early May:** Final sowing for late summer/early autumn flowers.

Tips for successful sweet pea growing

1. Soak seeds overnight before sowing to improve germination.
2. Use deep pots or root trainers to accommodate their long roots.
3. Pinch out growing tips when plants reach about 10cm tall to encourage bushier growth.
4. Provide support (netting or canes) for the plants to climb up.

PLANTING

Once have you seedlings, or have bought your plants, the next step is to get them into the ground.

Transplanting seedlings

Transplanting involves moving seedlings from their initial growing container to a larger pot or into the garden. This process requires care to minimise stress on the young plants. Seedlings are usually ready for transplanting when they have developed their first set of true leaves (the leaves that appear after the initial seed leaves, or cotyledons).

Steps for transplanting

1. Prepare the new pots or garden bed. Ensure the soil is moist and well-draining.
2. Water the seedlings. This helps keep the root ball intact during transplanting.
3. Gently insert a plant label or similar tool around the edges of the container to loosen the soil.
4. Lift the seedling by supporting the plant by its leaves rather than the stem, which is delicate and easily damaged.

Gently press the soil around the seedling to eliminate air pockets. Choose a pot just large enough for the roots to grow, and water thoroughly

5. In the new pot or garden bed, make a hole large enough to accommodate the seedling's roots.
6. Place the seedling in the hole at the same depth it was growing before. The cotyledons, or lowest set of leaves, should be just above the soil level.
7. Gently press the soil around the seedling to eliminate air pockets.
8. Give the newly transplanted seedling a thorough but gentle watering.
9. If transplanting outdoors, consider providing temporary shade for a few days to help the seedling adjust.

Planting young plants

✿ Plant on a cloudy day or in the evening to reduce transplant shock.
✿ Dig a hole slightly larger than the plant's root ball.
✿ Water the plant in its pot before planting to ensure the root ball is moist.
✿ Gently squeeze the sides of the pot and turn it upside down, supporting the soil around the plant with your hand. Never pull the plant out by its stem.
✿ If the roots are tightly wound, gently tease them apart to encourage outward growth.
✿ Place it in the hole at the same depth it was growing in the pot. The top of the root ball should be level with the soil surface.
✿ Fill in around the plant with soil, gently firming it down to remove air pockets.
✿ Give the plant a thorough watering to help settle the soil around the roots.
✿ Apply a layer of organic mulch around the plant, keeping it away from the stem to prevent rot.

Remember... Don't be discouraged if some plants don't thrive – gardening is a learning process, and even experienced gardeners face challenges. Keep observing, learning, and adjusting your techniques

Trees and shrubs

1. Dig a hole twice as wide as the root ball but no deeper.

2. Improve the soil by mixing some well-rotted organic matter with the excavated soil.

3. Position the tree or shrub. Ensure it's at the same depth it was growing previously. The root flare (where the trunk widens at the base) should be visible above ground. If the roots are tightly wound, gently tease them apart to encourage outward growth.

4. For larger specimens or in windy areas, use a stake and tree tie to support the plant.

5. As with smaller plants, backfill with soil and water thoroughly.

6. Apply a generous layer of mulch around the base, keeping it away from the trunk.

COMMON PLANTING MISTAKES TO AVOID

Planting too deep
This can lead to stem rot and poor growth. Ensure the plant is at the same depth it was in its original container.

Overcrowding
Follow spacing guidelines to allow plants room to grow and reduce competition for resources.

Inadequate watering
Consistent moisture is crucial for newly planted specimens. Water deeply and regularly until established.

Planting at the wrong time
Follow recommendations for your climate and the specific plant. Some prefer spring planting, while others do better when planted in autumn.

Ignoring soil preparation
Taking time to improve your soil before planting pays dividends in plant health and productivity.

Forgetting to harden off seedlings
Gradually acclimatise indoor-grown seedlings to outdoor conditions over a week or two before transplanting.

Not considering mature size
Remember that tiny seedling may grow into a large plant. Plan accordingly to avoid future overcrowding.

Tips for planting...

Vegetables
- Many vegetables prefer full sun and rich, well-draining soil.
- Consider crop rotation to prevent soil depletion and reduce pest and disease problems.
- Some vegetables, like peas and beans, can be sown directly into the garden, while others, like tomatoes and peppers, are best started indoors and transplanted.

Herbs
- Many herbs prefer well-draining soil and full sun.
- Some spreading herbs, like mint, are best planted in containers to control their growth.
- Many Mediterranean herbs like rosemary and thyme prefer slightly alkaline soil.

Flowers
- Consider the eventual height of flowers when planting, placing taller varieties at the back of borders.
- Some flowers, like sunflowers and nasturtiums, are easy to grow from seed sown directly in the garden.
- Others, like petunias and impatiens, are often easier to grow from nursery-bought seedlings.

Trees and shrubs
- Consider the mature size and shape when choosing a planting location.
- Ensure there's adequate space from buildings, power lines, and other plants.
- Many trees and shrubs are best planted in autumn or early spring, when they're dormant.

Bulbs
- Most spring-flowering bulbs are planted in autumn.
- Plant bulbs at a depth of about three times their height.
- The pointed end of the bulb should face upwards.

Aftercare
Once your plants are in the ground, they'll need ongoing care to thrive.

1. Keep the soil consistently moist but not waterlogged. Water deeply and less frequently to encourage deep root growth.
2. Apply appropriate fertiliser according to the plant's needs and the time of year.
3. Apply a layer of organic mulch around plants to conserve moisture, suppress weeds, and improve soil quality.
4. Remove dead or diseased growth and shape plants as needed.
5. Regularly inspect plants for signs of problems and take appropriate action if needed.
6. Provide stakes or other support for tall or climbing plants.

Watering

Proper watering is essential for a healthy garden, whether you're growing flowers, vegetables or a combination. Losing a plant that you've sown from seed, nurtured and planted, simply by not watering it correctly is both frustrating and avoidable.

Basic watering tools

Watering can: Ideal for precise watering of containers and small flower beds, and for applying fertiliser.

Hose with spray nozzle: Useful for larger areas, but use wisely (see hosepipe ban section).

When to water

✿ Early morning is best. This reduces evaporation and allows leaves to dry before nightfall, and helps prevent fungal diseases.

✿ Check soil moisture before watering by inserting your finger about 5cm (2 inches) into the soil; if it feels dry, it's time to water.

How much

✿ Most flowering plants need about 2.5cm (1 inch) of water per week, including rainfall.

✿ Container plants and thirsty flowers like sweet peas may need daily watering in hot weather. Sweet peas can even grow with their pots standing in trays half-full of water.

Top tips

- If using tap water, leave it to stand for a few hours so the chlorine can dissipate
- Ericaceaous (lime-loving) plants prefer to be watered with rainwater
- Water early in the morning or in the evening to reduce evaporation

SHUTTERSTOCK

Efficient watering techniques

- Soak, don't sprinkle: Focus on delivering water directly to the plant's roots rather than watering the leaves **(1)**.
- Create low banks around flower beds to hold water in place **(2)**.
- For thirsty plants like sweet peas, courgettes and sweetcorn, insert a large pot or drainpipe nearby to slowly release water **(3)**.
- Water in several trips, giving some each time to allow it to soak down rather than sideways.
- Avoid splashing water on flowers, as this can lead to rot **(4)**.
- When using a hose, avoid spraying or sprinkling. Instead, use it to fill a big butt and let the water warm up before using in watering cans.

WATER CONSERVATION TIPS

Rainwater harvesting

- Use water butts to collect rainwater from roofs.
- Even a small roof can yield significant amounts of water. A 93m^2 (1,000 sq ft) roof can collect about 600 gallons from just one inch of rain.
- Get creative with collection containers – clean, repurposed containers can work well.
- Cover most water butts to prevent debris buildup, but consider leaving one open for birds to enjoy.

Mulching

- Apply a 5-7cm layer of organic mulch (bark chips, straw, compost) around flowers and shrubs.
- This reduces evaporation, suppresses weeds, and improves soil structure.

Efficient watering practices

- Water at the base of plants to minimise water on leaves and petals.
- Avoid watering in windy conditions to reduce evaporation.
- Group plants with similar water needs together in your flower beds.

Using recycled water

- Use 'grey water' from baths or washing up for watering flowers (avoid if it contains harsh chemicals).
- Collect the tapwater that runs while you're waiting for it to get hot.

WATER BUTTS

Water butts are an excellent way to harvest rainwater for your garden, but they do need some care to keep them functioning properly and to ensure the water remains usable

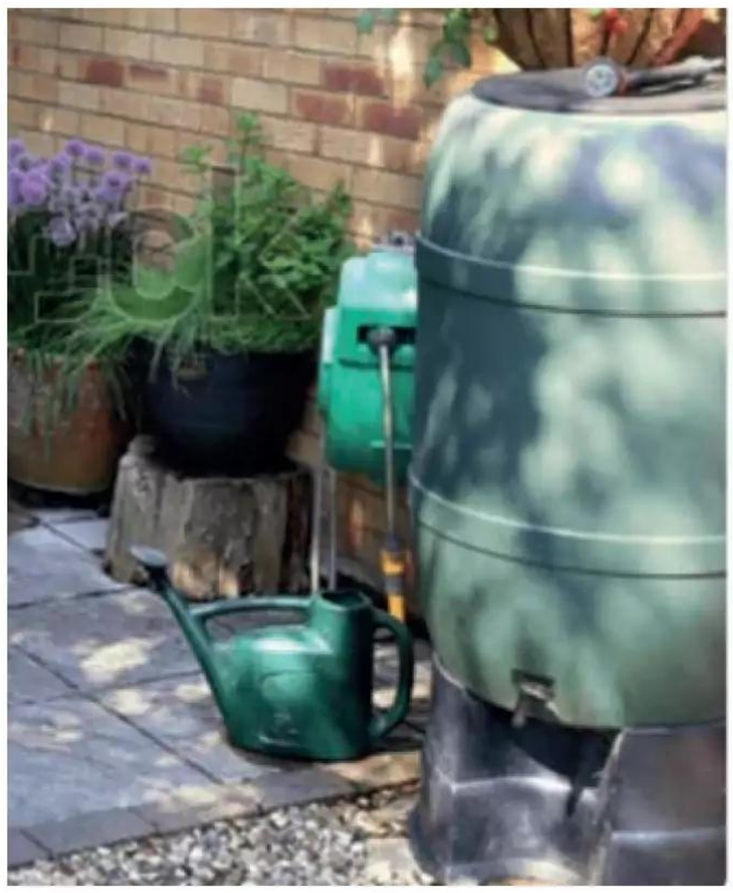
✿ Regular cleaning
Clean your water butt at least once a year, ideally in late autumn after the leaves have fallen.

Empty the butt and scrub the inside with a long-handled brush and a mild, environmentally-friendly detergent. Rinse thoroughly with clean water.

✿ Prevent algae growth
Keep your water butt out of direct sunlight if possible to discourage algae growth. Add a small amount of barley straw to the water, which naturally inhibits algae.

✿ Manage mosquitoes
Consider adding a few drops of vegetable oil to the water surface to prevent mosquito larvae from breathing.

✿ Winter care
Disconnect and drain before winter to prevent ice damage. If you can't empty it, leave some space at the top for water expansion when it freezes.



✿ Check and clean filters
Clean any guards or filters regularly to prevent blockages. Remove debris from the top of the butt and around the downpipe to ensure water flows freely.

✿ Maintain taps and connectors
Check taps, connectors, and overflow pipes regularly for leaks or blockages. Replace washers or seals as needed.

✿ Prevent stagnation
Use the water regularly to keep it fresh. If the butt hasn't been used for a while, consider emptying and refilling it.

✿ Manage overflow
Some kits have diverters that will bypass the butt once it's full. If yours doesn't have this, ensure the overflow pipe is clear and directed away from your house foundations.

✿ Safety considerations
Secure your water butt to prevent it from toppling, especially if it's on a stand. Keep the lid locked if you have small children or pets.

✿ Water quality
Harvested rainwater is not potable. Use it only for garden watering.

✿ Odour control
If you notice unpleasant smells, adding a small amount of bicarbonate of soda can help neutralise odours.

Remember... Using harvested rainwater reduces your water bill, is better for your plants, and it's free from chemicals like chlorine, making it gentler on delicate plants

Fitting a water butt

Although a stand is optional, you will need to make sure that you can fit a watering can underneath the outlet, and remove it when it's full without having to tip it to one side (and losing water!). You don't need to buy a stand, bricks or blocks work just as well. Just make sure that whatever you use will be stable and flat when the butt is full – they are very heavy.

Materials
- Water butt
- Water butt stand (optional but recommended)
- Diverter kit (includes a diverter and connector)
- Saw (for cutting the downpipe)
- Drill (if your water butt doesn't have a pre-drilled hole)
- Screwdriver

Method
1. Choose a location near the downpipe on a flat, stable surface.
2. If needed, drill a hole for in the inlet into the water butt about 10cm from the top.
3. Cut the downpipe 40-50cm above where the top of your water butt will sit (make sure to allow for a stand).
4. Insert the diverter into the cut section of the downpipe.
5. Connect the water butt to the diverter using the provided connector.
6. Fit the lid and overflow pipe to the water butt.
7. Test the system by pouring water into the top of the downpipe.

DIY OLLA

An olla is essentially a terracotta pot that you bury next to your plants and fill with water. It releases a gentle stream of moisture when needed, so you don't need to water the plants every day. They date back thousands of years from ancient water conservation techniques used in arid regions such as North Africa, Spain, and Latin America, particularly in areas with hot, dry climates.

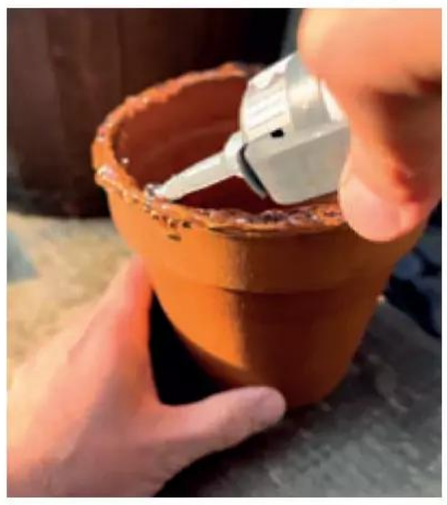
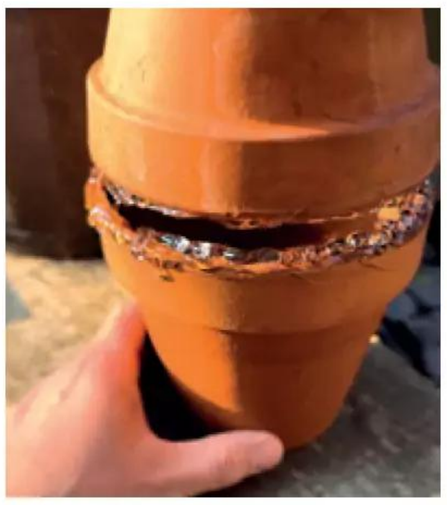
Materials

- Two small terracotta pots
- Pond or silicone-based watertight sealant
- A couple of large stones

Method

1. Clean your pots thoroughly. If using old pots, scrub them well in warm soapy water with a nail brush or scouring pad.
2. Seal the hole in the bottom of one pot by applying a generous layer of silicone sealant around the inside of the hole. Press a large stone or slate chip into the sealant to cover the hole.
3. Join the two pots. Apply a substantial layer of sealant around the rim of the sealed pot. Place the second pot on top, pushing down to secure them together. Smooth out excess sealant with a stone or cloth if you like.
4. Allow the sealant to dry overnight or until fully set.
5. Choose where to use your olla – They work well in the ground, but aren't strictly necessary in borders and beds. Consider using them in larger pots and containers that are more likely to dry out in hot temperatures.
6. Bury your olla as deep as you can, ensuring the top remains above soil level and fill it with water. Place a stone over the hole on the top to prevent insects and small creatures from entering.

Refill as needed, typically every 5-10 days depending on weather and soil conditions.

Hosepipe bans

During dry summers, water companies may impose hosepipe bans (also called Temporary Use Bans) to conserve water. When in effect:

- You cannot use a hosepipe connected to mains water for watering your flower garden.
- You can still use watering cans, buckets, or water butts filled with rainwater.
- Stay informed about local restrictions and follow guidelines to avoid fines.
- Plan ahead by increasing your rainwater storage capacity for your flower beds.

Additional water-saving tips

✔ Improve soil structure by adding organic matter to improve water retention in sandy soils and drainage in clay soils.

✔Choose drought-tolerant flowers, especially native plants or those adapted to your local climate.

✔Maintain your watering system by fixing leaky hoses and taps promptly.

✔Practice good garden hygiene by removing weeds that compete for water in your flower beds.

✔Avoid over-fertilising your flowers, which can increase water needs.

✔Consider using water-retaining gels in potting soil for container flowers.

✔Create windbreaks using fences or hedges to reduce water loss through evaporation in your garden.

Troubleshooting

Signs of overwatering

- Yellowing leaves
- Soft, limp growth
- Mould on soil surface

Signs of underwatering

- Wilting
- Brown, crispy leaf edges
- Slow growth

It's hard to over-water plants during the summer as they are making strong growth and their demand for water is immense. However, observation is key. Different plants have different water requirements, so adjust your watering as you learn about your garden's specific needs.

Fertilisers and feeding

Understanding how to feed your plants is crucial for helping them to thrive, and produce flowers and fruit. Well-nourished plants are also better equipped to cope with diseases and pests. When plants are healthy and robust, they can develop stronger natural defenses and are more resilient to environmental stresses. This means they're less likely to succumb to common garden ailments and can often fight off or tolerate pest attacks more effectively than undernourished plants.

Fertilisers provide essential nutrients to plants, primarily nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). These are often referred to as 'NPK'.

NPK explained

N (Nitrogen): Promotes leaf growth and green colour.

P (Phosphorus): Supports root development and flowering.

K (Potassium): Enhances overall plant health, flowering, and fruiting.

Types of fertilisers

The general rule of thumb is that the faster a plant is growing, the more feed it will need. This is why liquid feeds such as potassium-rich tomato feeds are so popular in summer when everything is flowering and fruiting. They are easier and quicker for the plants to take up and use.

However, because they are liquid they are used up quickly and they are also more easily washed away in rain. For this reason, it's a good idea to start the year with a granular fertiliser, and top it up during peak growing in the summer.

Spray-on foliar feeds are also useful for plants once they are in growth. They give an instant boost via the leaves and are useful for countering certain nutrient deficiencies, as well as combatting some pests and diseases. As with all liquid feeds, they require regular application.

Granular feeds last longer than liquid feeds but still need to be re-applied every couple of months in summer if your plants are starting to show signs of stress or are flowering less well than expected.

Start using them in spring and continue until early September when plant growth slows. It is not advisable to feed plants after late August/early September (depending where you are in the country) as it will promote new growth that is prone to frost damage when the weather gets colder.

Powdered blood, fish and bone, and bone meal, can be dug in a few weeks before planting to give them time to break down and enrich the soil. You can also sprinkle them around established plants, but fork them in to prevent them from attracting foxes, badgers and vermin.

Formats

a) Granular: Dry pellets or grains spread on soil surface.
b) Liquid: Dissolved nutrients for quick absorption.
c) Slow-release: Coated pellets that release nutrients gradually.
d) Organic: Made from natural materials like compost or manure.
e) Synthetic: Manufactured chemical fertilisers.

When to feed

Spring: As plants start growing, use a balanced fertiliser.
Summer: Regular feeding for flowering and fruiting plants.
Late summer/autumn: Reduce feeding as growth slows.
Winter: Most plants don't need feeding during dormancy.

How to apply

- Always follow the package instructions.
- For granular feeds, sprinkle around plants and water in.
- Liquid feeds can be applied with a watering can or as a foliar spray.

HOMEMADE FERTILISERS

Comfrey is an excellent plant for making your own fertiliser. It is rich in NPK and other trace elements. Use 'Bocking 14' variety to prevent invasive spread.

You will need
- Two-litre plastic drinks bottle, without a cap
- A collecting vessel – large yoghurt pot, ice cream carton or similar

Method
1. Turn the bottle upside down and cut off the bottom.
2. Pack in cut and bruised comfrey leaves so the bottle is full. Press them down firmly.
3. Cover the open end with a polythene bag, held in place with an elastic band, to prevent drying out.
4. Stand/fix/wedge the bottle upside down so that it will drip into your collecting vessel.

5. As the leaves rot, a brown comfrey liquid will drip out of the bottle into the collecting vessel below.
6. Add fresh cut/bruised leaves, pressed down firmly, into the bottle, to keep a constant supply of rotting material.
7. This concentrate should be watered down according to its strength. When thick and black, dilute one-part feed to 20-parts water. When thin and brown, dilute one-to-10. You don't need to be too precise!

Nettle tea

Nettle tea is made in a similar way to comfrey tea, but there are some slight differences in the process.

Harvesting and preparation
Wear gloves to protect yourself from the stinging hairs. Cut young nettle plants before they flower, or just the tops of older plants.

You can use fresh nettles or allow them to wilt for 24 hours to reduce the sting. Roughly chop the nettles to help release the nutrients.

Steeping method (different from the comfrey method)
1. Place the chopped nettles in a bucket or large container and cover with water (rainwater is best if available).
2. Use a weight to keep the nettles submerged.
3. Cover the bucket with a lid or cloth to keep insects out.

4. Let the mixture steep for about 2-4 weeks. Stir every few days if possible. The liquid will become dark and may smell quite strong – this is normal.
5. After 2-4 weeks, strain the liquid to remove the plant material. The remaining plant matter can be added to your compost.

Dilute the concentrated tea before use, similar to comfrey tea. For a strong brew, use 1 part nettle tea to 10 parts water. For a weaker solution, use 1 part nettle tea to 20 parts water.

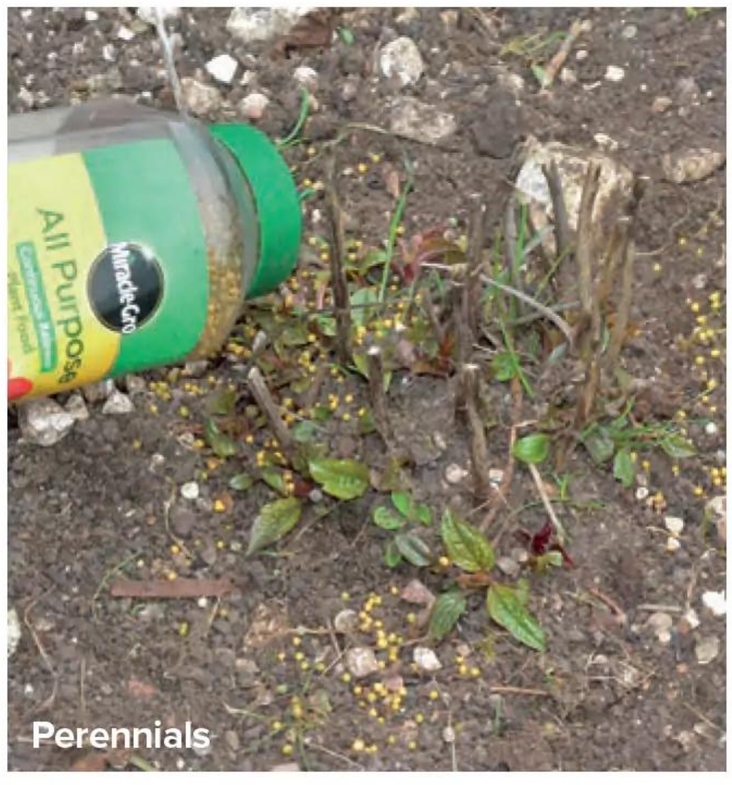
FEEDING DIFFERENT PLANTS

Established trees and shrubs don't need feeding, but a potassium-rich feed, or even some wood ash, will help fruit trees and young trees, boosting blossom and fruits.

Perennials: As perennials shoot and reappear from under the soil in the spring, fork a slow-release feed around their roots and water it in.

Container plants: Perennials, trees and shrubs growing in containers need topdressing with fresh compost and some slow-release fertiliser such as Growmore.

Ericaceous plants: Plants that thrive in acidic soils such as rhododendron, camellia, blueberries, azaleas and most heathers, need an ericaceous feed plus seaweed feed.



Perennials

Container plants

✿ Organic vs synthetic

Organic: Improves soil structure, releases nutrients slowly.

Synthetic: Fast-acting, precise nutrient ratios, often tailored to specific plants, such as roses, or citrus plants.

✿ Common mistakes

- Over-fertilising can harm plants. More isn't always better!
- Using high-nitrogen feeds late in the season can cause frost-vulnerable growth.

✿ Eco-friendly tips

- Use compost and well-rotted manure to improve soil naturally.
- Try making your own comfrey or nettle 'tea' for a natural, nutrient-rich feed.

Healthy soil is the foundation of a thriving garden. While fertilisers are important, they're just one part of good plant care alongside proper watering, mulching, and pest management.

Container gardening

Container gardening is an excellent solution if you have limited space, a town garden, or for adding versatility to outdoor areas. The flexibility of using containers allows for growing a wide variety of flowers, herbs, vegetables, and even small fruit trees.

Benefits of container gardening

Flexibility: Move pots to follow the sun or create new displays
Space-saving: Ideal for balconies, patios, and small gardens
Accessibility: Easier to tend than ground-level beds
Soil control: Use the perfect soil mix for each plant type
Pest management: Easier to monitor and control pests in containers

With planning, you can have containers blooming year-round. Choose plants spanning different seasons for long-lasting colour without sacrificing space.

A small tree in a pot can be used to create a focal point, and can be moved to wherever it's needed at different times of the year

Container choice

✿ Size

- Choose pots that provide enough room for root growth
- Larger containers retain moisture better and require less frequent watering

✿ Material

Terracotta: Porous, allows air exchange, but dries out quickly

Plastic: Lightweight, retains moisture, available in many styles

Wood: Attractive, insulates roots, but may rot over time

Metal: Durable, but can heat up in direct sun

Fabric pots: Excellent drainage, promotes air pruning of roots

✿ Drainage

- Ensure containers have adequate drainage holes
- Use pot feet or stands to improve air circulation and drainage

✿ Colour

- Dark containers absorb heat, which can be beneficial in cool climates
- Light-coloured pots reflect heat, helping to keep roots cool in hot areas

SHUTTERSTOCK

HANGING BASKETS

Hanging baskets are a versatile and attractive way to add colour and interest to your garden, particularly in small spaces. They're perfect for patios, balconies, and even indoors near a bright window.

1. Choosing the right basket
Wire baskets lined with moss or fibre liners offer good drainage. Plastic baskets are lightweight and retain moisture well. Ensure the basket has drainage holes.

2. Potting mix
Use a lightweight, well-draining potting mix. Add water-retaining gel to help with moisture retention.

3. Planting
Plant through the sides as well as the top for a full, rounded effect. Start with a trailing plant in the centre, surrounded by bushy plants, then add more trailing plants around the edges.

4. Watering
Check daily in summer as they dry out quickly. Water until it runs from the drainage holes.

5. Feeding
Use a liquid fertiliser every 1-2 weeks during the growing season

Salad leaves. Lettuce will grow well in hanging baskets, and the bonus is a crop free of slugs and snails. Mix your seeds for a colourful crop, using, for example, red and green 'Salad Bowl' or 'Lollo Rossa' lettuce. Team cut-and-come-again salad plants with edible flowers and colourful 'Bull's Blood' beetroot and ruby chard

Take 3 basket combinations...

TRADITIONAL

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Petunia Surfinia* 'Lime'**
Ivory-white trumpets with limegreen throats that will cascade over the side of your basket. Fine in light shade. **Trails:** 40cm (16in); **S:** 30cm (12in).

***Helichrysum* 'Silver Mist'**
The trailing stems of small silvery-grey leaves work well with flowers of all colours. **Trails:** 30-60cm (12-24in) **S:** 30-45cm (12-18 in).

***Nemesia* 'Wisley Vanilla'**
Masses of vanilla-scented flowers, white with hints of pale-pink and yellow centres, are produced from May until the first frosts. **H&S:** 20cm (8in).

SHADE LOVERS

SHUTTERSTOCK

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Athyrium niponicum
Deeply cut, grey-green fronds and flashes of purple and silver. Replant in the garden or in a container in autumn. **HxS:** 30x60cm (1x2ft)

Hosta 'Francee' AGM
Rippled mid-green leaves with creamy white edges, and tall lavender-blue blooms. Replant in the garden or pots in autumn. **HxS:** 55x50cm (22x20in)

Pelargonium 'Blanche Roche'
Trails but also adds height with stems of white flowers. Happy in dappled shade. Overwinter indoors for next year. **H:** 38cm (15in); **Trails:** 8in (20cm).

EDIBLE

SHUTTERSTOCK

SHUTTERSTOCK

Nasturtium 'Black Velvet'
Compact and bushy. Mahogany-red (sometimes almost black) flowers. Flowers and leaves are edible. **HxS:** 45x25cm (18x10in).

Basil
Available in green and purple-leaved varieties, loves a sunny spot. Pick over frequently to encourage bushy growth. **HxS:** 35x30cm (15inx1ft).

Tomato 'Tumbling Tom'
One of the best varieties for hanging baskets. It's a bush type, so no need to remove side shoots. Red or yellow fruit. **H:** 1ft (30cm); **Trails:** 20in (50cm).

Care and maintenance

Watering

- Check soil moisture regularly; containers dry out faster than in-ground plants
- Water deeply until water runs out of drainage holes
- Water more frequently during hot, dry periods
- Consider self-watering containers for consistent moisture

Feeding

- Use a balanced, water-soluble fertiliser every 2-4 weeks during the growing season
- Alternatively, use slow-release fertiliser pellets at the beginning of the season
- Reduce feeding in autumn as growth slows

Soil care

- Top up soil levels as needed, as potting mix can settle over time
- Refresh the top layer of soil annually with fresh compost
- Repot plants every 2-3 years or when they outgrow their containers

Selecting the right potting mix

1. Use a high-quality, well-draining potting mix, not garden soil
2. Look for mixes that are peat-free and contain perlite and vermiculite
3. Consider adding water-retaining crystals for improved moisture retention
4. For succulents and cacti, use a specialised free-draining mix

Pruning and deadheading:

- Regularly remove dead or yellowing leaves
- Pinch back growth tips to encourage bushiness
- Deadhead flowering plants to promote continuous blooming

Seasonal care

Spring

- Clean containers and refresh potting mix
- Replant annual containers
- Prune perennials as needed

Summer

- Increase watering frequency
- Deadhead and prune to maintain shape and encourage blooming
- Monitor for pests and diseases

Autumn

- Reduce watering and feeding as growth slows
- Plant spring-flowering bulbs
- Bring tender plants indoors or provide protection

Winter

- Move containers to sheltered locations if possible
- Raise pots off the ground to prevent waterlogging
- Protect plants from frost with horticultural fleece or bubble wrap

Pest & disease management

Inspect plants regularly for signs of pests or diseases. Ensure good air circulation to prevent fungal issues. Use organic pest control methods when possible, such as neem oil or insecticidal soap.

PLANT CHOICES

Flowers

Annuals: Cosmos, sweet alyssum, zinnias, lobelia – *Provide quick colour and can be changed seasonally*
Perennials: Geraniums, salvias, lavender, coneflowers – *Offer long-term structure and interest*

Bulbs

Alliums, irises, gladioli – *Plant in layers for successive blooming*

Climbers

Sweet peas, black-eyed Susan vine, nasturtiums – *Use with trellises or obelisks for vertical interest*

Edibles

Herbs
Chives, parsley, sage – *Ideal for kitchen gardens or sunny windowsills*
Vegetables
Cherry tomatoes, chilli peppers, dwarf beans – *Choose compact or bush varieties for smaller containers*

Small fruits

Alpine strawberries, dwarf raspberry bushes – *Provide edible interest and ornamental value*

Consider the weight of your containers when planning their placement. Large pots filled with soil and plants can be extremely heavy, especially when watered. Use pot trolleys or place containers on wheels for easier and safer moving or relocation

Design tips and plant combinations

1. Use the 'thriller, filler, spiller' technique for balanced container designs
Thriller: Tall, upright plants (eg, snapdragons, delphiniums)
Filler: Mounding plants (eg, nemesia, diascia)
Spiller: Trailing plants (eg, trailing lobelia, bacopa)

2. Consider colour schemes
Monochromatic: Variations of one colour (eg, different shades of pink)
Complementary: Colours opposite on the colour wheel (eg, purple and yellow)
Analogous: Colours next to each other on the colour wheel (eg, blue, purple, and pink)

3. Mix textures for visual interest
Combine fine-textured plants (eg, asparagus fern) with bold-leaved plants (eg, coleus)

SUNNY COTTAGE GARDEN

SHUTTERSTOCK

Thriller: Gaura 'Whirling Butterflies'

SHUTTERSTOCK

Filler: Scabiosa 'Butterfly Blue'

SHUTTERSTOCK

Spiller: Calibrachoa 'Million Bells'

SHADY ELEGANCE

SHUTTERSTOCK

Thriller: Fuchsia 'Swingtime'

SHUTTERSTOCK

Filler: Heuchera 'Palace Purple'

SHUTTERSTOCK

Spiller: Dichondra 'Silver Falls'

MEDITERRANEAN CHARM

SHUTTERSTOCK

Thriller: Osteospermum 'Voltage Yellow'

SHUTTERSTOCK

Filler: Argyranthemum 'Madeira Crested Pink

SHUTTERSTOCK

Spiller: Sanvitalia 'Aztec Gold'

DROUGHT-RESISTANT

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Erigeron karvinskianus* (Mexican fleabane)** Small daisy-like flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Delosperma cooperi* (Ice plant)** - Succulent with bright pink flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Sedum rupestre* 'Blue spruce'** Blue/grey leaved mat-forming succulent

HERB GARDEN

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens' (Purple sage)**
Aromatic purple-tinged leaves

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Origanum vulgare* 'Aureum' (Golden Oregano)**
Golden leaves, pink flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Melissa officinalis* (Lemonbalm)**
Lemon-scented leaves, small white flowers

POLLINATOR-FRIENDLY

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Calendula officinalis* (Pot Marigold)**
Orange edible flowers

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Borago officinalis* (Borage)**
Blue star-shaped flowers, young leaves edible

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Ageratum houstonianum* 'Blue horizon'** Fuzzy blue flowers

Remember... container gardening offers endless possibilities for creating beautiful, productive spaces in even the smallest areas. With the right containers, soil, plant selection, and care, you can enjoy a thriving garden on your patio, balcony, or even indoors. Don't be afraid to experiment and find what works best for your space and style!

Vegetable gardens

Growing your own vegetables can be very rewarding, providing fresh, nutritious food and a great sense of accomplishment. Success relies on careful planning, understanding crop rotation, and using companion planting techniques.

Planning

Select a spot that receives at least six hours of direct sunlight daily, with good drainage and protection from strong winds. Consider how close it is to a water source for easy irrigation.

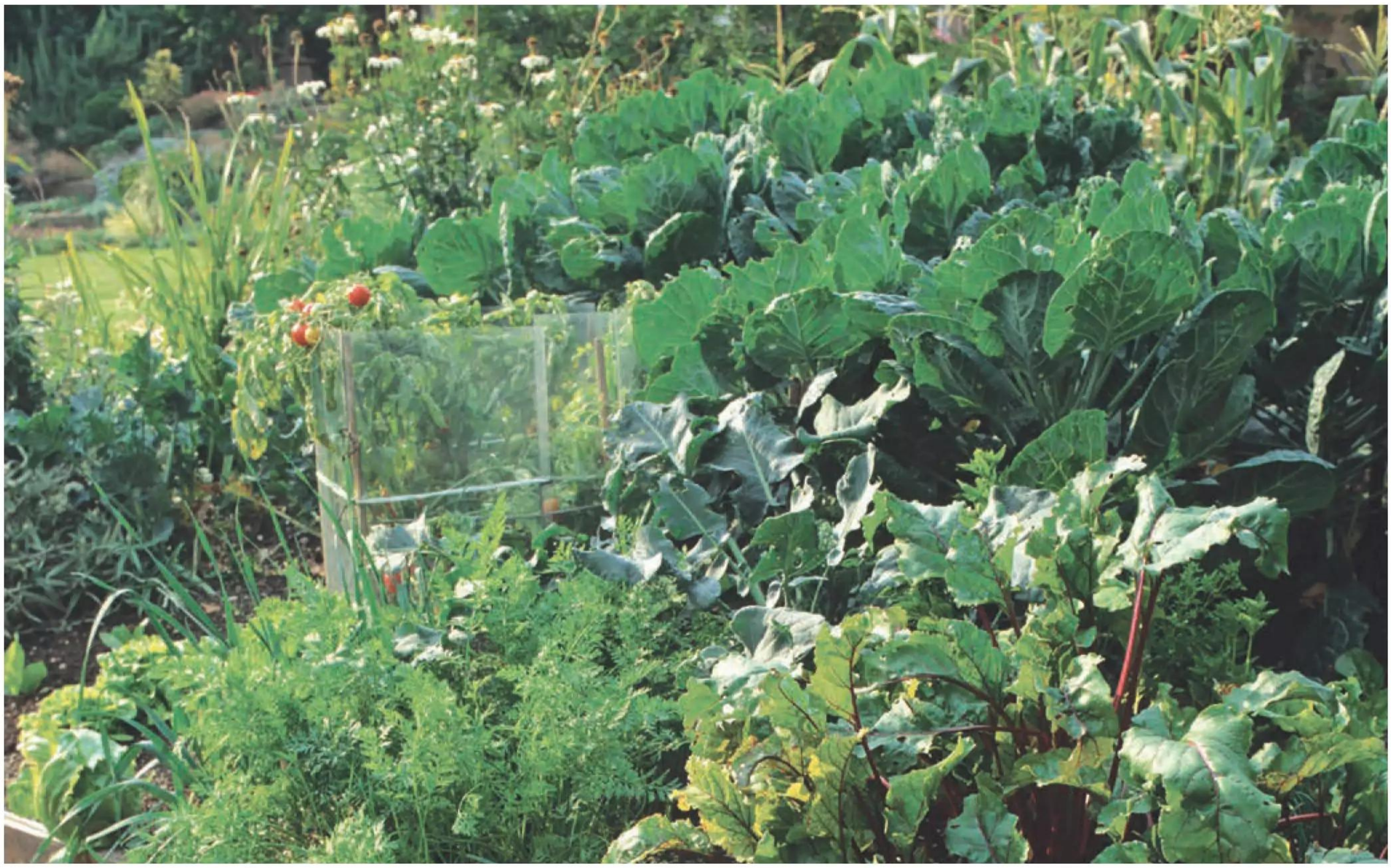
Use a soil test kit to determine the pH and nutrient levels of your soil. Most vegetables prefer a slightly acidic to neutral pH (6.0-7.0). You can improve soil structure by adding organic matter like compost.

Decide on the layout. Traditional rows are good for larger spaces, raised beds offer better drainage and soil control, and square-foot gardening makes the most of your space in small areas. Container gardening is also ideal for patios or balconies.

Consider your climate and growing season, to make sure that you're using suitable plants. Mix easy-to-grow plants (eg, lettuce, radishes) with more challenging ones.

The most important thing is to choose vegetables your family enjoys eating. Unless you have a very large garden, and/or are prepared to put in hours of work, it's unlikely that you'll be able to be self-sufficient in veg, but you will be able to make a dent in your grocery bill, you'll be eating fresher food, you'll know exactly where it's come from and whether or not it has been treated with chemicals that you might want to avoid.

Create a planting calendar and plan your sowings to ensure a continuous harvest. Fast-growing crops like lettuce and radishes are good candidates for succession planting, and if you use this for peas and beans too, you'll extend the cropping season, and even it out so you can avoid gluts. Make a note of the



Did You know... Square-foot gardening is a simple method that optimises space in small gardens, dividing the area into grids for better plant growth and easier management

Make the most of your space by growing upwards. Vertical walls are usually damper at the bottom, so site your plants accordingly

expected harvest times for each crop.

Plan for vertical space and use trellises, cages, or stakes for climbing plants like peas and tomatoes. This maximises space and improves air circulation. Remember to include paths and access points, so you can reach all parts of your garden without compacting the soil. Consider water management too. Is your water butt close to where you need it? Will your hose reach? Include water-saving techniques like mulching when you're planting.

Crop rotation

Crop rotation involves changing the location of vegetable families within your garden each season. This practice offers several benefits:

✿ Prevents soil depletion

- Different crops use varying levels of nutrients
- Rotation helps maintain soil fertility

✿ Reduces pest and disease problems

- Many pests and diseases are specific to plant families
- Moving crops disrupts their life cycles

✿ Improves soil structure

- Deep-rooted plants help break up compacted soil
- Shallow-rooted plants prevent erosion

Typical four-year rotation plan

Year 1: Brassicas (eg, cabbage, broccoli)
Year 2: Legumes (eg, peas, beans)
Year 3: Alliums (eg, onions, garlic)
Year 4: Solanaceae (eg, tomatoes, potatoes)

Tips for effective crop rotation

- Group plants by family
- Keep records of where crops are planted each year
- Include green manures in your rotation to improve soil
- Be flexible; adjust your plan based on what grows well in your garden

Lettuce and salad leaves

For what they are, salad leaves are expensive to buy, so these are a great thing to be growing for yourself, and you can create your own mixes of leaves and herbs. If you grew up associating thickly-cut and undressed 'Iceberg' lettuce as a 'salad', a wider world of exciting opportunities awaits. There is little joy or love in a supermarket salad bag anyway – it soon goes off after opening and the leaves are not home-picked, lovingly grown or particularly fresh.

Sow seeds thinly, about 1cm deep, in rows 15cm apart. For continuous crops, sow small batches every 2-3 weeks from March to September. Germination typically occurs within 7-10 days.

When seedlings are about 5cm tall, thin them to 10-15cm apart. Alternatively, transplant seedlings to their final positions at this stage. For cut-and-come-again leaves, space plants closer together, about 5cm apart.

Keep soil consistently moist but not waterlogged. Water in the morning to reduce risk of fungal diseases. Apply a balanced liquid fertiliser every 2-3 weeks.

Lettuce will grow in partial shade, and will do well underneath bean supports where the soil is cooler.

Use horticultural fleece to protect young plants from pests and cold weather. Consider shade cloth in hot weather to prevent bolting.

Begin harvesting outer leaves when plants are about 10cm tall. For cut-and-come-again, cut leaves about 2.5cm above soil level.

Lettuces and salads crops will grow very happily in containers, in the right conditions.

Top tips

- Succession planting: Sow new seeds every 2-3 weeks for a continuous harvest.
- Combine different colours and textures for interesting salads.
- Plant quick-growing salad leaves between slower-growing vegetables.
- Use physical barriers like fine mesh to deter pests.
- Bolting prevention: In hot weather, provide partial shade and keep well-watered.

Make room for lettuce

No dedicated vegetable garden? No problem. Salad ingredients tend to be good light-on-the -soil companions that can be grown around other plants.

- Use leafy greens as ground cover plants in gaps around other crops in a vegetable garden

- Grow salad varieties in flower borders around other plants
- Container flowers? Why not pop some colourful leafy vegetables in to make a nice backdrop
- If you don't have much space and your borders are full, why not try windowsill growing? That way, fresh salad leaves are always to hand when you need them.

Growing potatoes in containers can be a good use of space.

Harvesting

Container-grown

For **new** potatoes, start harvesting when plants flower (about 10 weeks after planting). For **maincrop** potatoes, wait until the foliage turns yellow and dies back

Potatoes

Potates are relatively cheap to buy, but the choice of variety can be limited, and digging up your own, on demand, is an incredible feeling. Not to mention how much better they'll taste! See the 'Harvesting' tips for an explantion of the different types.

POTATOES IN CONTAINERS

An easy way to get started is by growing your spuds above-ground. Use containers, at least 30cm deep and wide, with plenty of holes in the bottom for good drainage. You can use purpose-made potato bags, large pots, or even old dustbins.

Choose seed potatoes from a reputable supplier, there will be lots of varieties to choose from. 'Chit' the potatoes by placing them in a cool, light place to sprout for 4-6 weeks before planting.

Fill the container with about 10cm of multi-purpose compost. Place 3-5 chitted seed potatoes on the surface, with the sprouts pointing upwards. Cover with another 10-15cm of compost.

Keep the compost consistently moist but not waterlogged, and water more frequently as the plants grow and weather warms.

Start feeding with a balanced liquid fertiliser when leaves appear above the soil, and feed every two weeks throughout the growing season.

Earth up potatoes when shoots are about 10cm tall. Add compost around stems, leaving the top leaves exposed.

Top tips

- Choose varieties suited for container growing like 'Charlotte', 'Rocket', or 'Jazzy'.
- Ensure containers receive at least six hours of sunlight daily.
- Don't grow potatoes in the same compost year after year, to prevent disease build-up.
- Check regularly for pests like aphids and remove by hand if found.
- After harvesting, store potatoes in a cool, dark place to prevent greening.
- After harvesting, the compost can be reused for other crops but not for potatoes again.

Continue as plants grow, stopping 5cm from the container top. This usually happens when the plants are 40-50cm (16-20 inches) tall. After this point, allow the plants to grow and flower without further earthing up. This method maximises the space in your container for potato production.

Move containers to a frost-free place if late frosts threaten. Cover young shoots with horticultural fleece if needed.

GROWING POTATOES IN THE GROUND

Choose a sunny spot with well-draining soil. Dig the area thoroughly, removing weeds and large stones. Add plenty of well-rotted compost or manure to improve soil structure and nutrients.

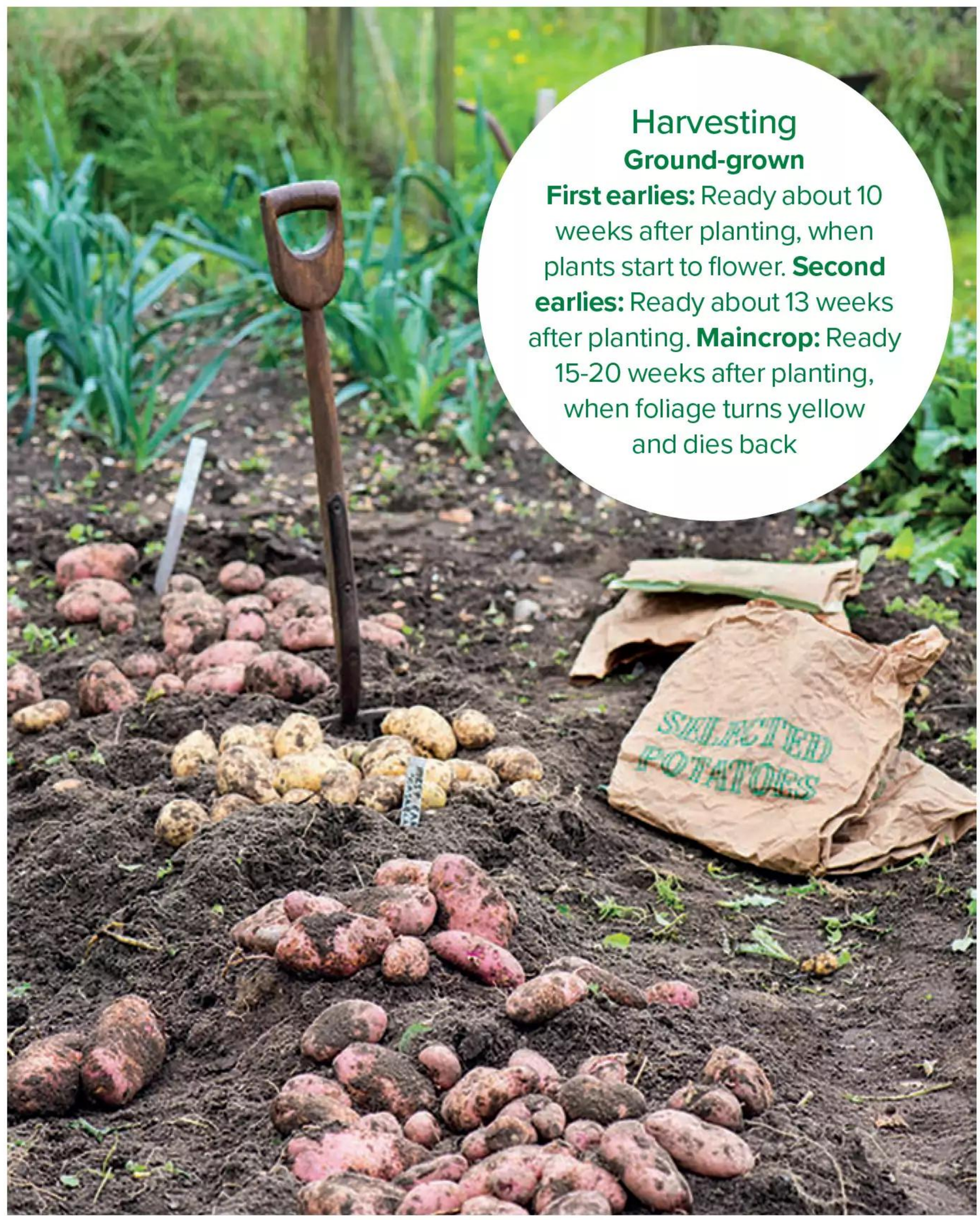
Buy certified seed potatoes from a garden centre or reputable supplier. 'Chit' the potatoes by placing them in a cool, light place to sprout for 4-6 weeks before planting.

Plant from late March to late April, when the soil has warmed up. Dig a trench about 12cm deep and 60cm wide. Space seed potatoes about 30cm apart for earlies, 37cm for maincrop varieties. Place the seed potatoes with shoots facing upwards and cover with soil.

Apply a general-purpose fertiliser when planting. For maincrop varieties, feed again with a high-potassium fertiliser when flowering begins.

Keep soil moist, especially during flowering and tuber formation and water deeply during dry spells. Begin earthing up when the shoots reach 20cm tall. Draw soil up around them leaving 5cm exposed. Repeat every 2-3 weeks until you have a ridge about 20cm high.

Keep the area weed-free, especially while plants are young. Cover young shoots with fleece if late frosts threaten.



Harvesting

Ground-grown

First earlies: Ready about 10 weeks after planting, when plants start to flower. **Second earlies:** Ready about 13 weeks after planting. **Maincrop:** Ready 15-20 weeks after planting, when foliage turns yellow and dies back

Once the shoots are 20cm, draw the earth up around them.

Common problems

Potato blight: A fungal disease causing foliage to rot. More common in warm, wet weather.

Slugs: Can damage tubers. Use organic slug pellets or nematodes for control.

Scab: Causes corky patches on tubers. Maintain even soil moisture and avoid liming soil where potatoes are to be grown.

Top tips

- Plant a few potatoes every couple of weeks for a longer harvesting period.
- Save space by growing potatoes in rows between other slower-growing vegetables.
- Watch for signs of blight (dark patches on leaves) and remove affected foliage promptly.
- Store maincrop potatoes in a cool, dark place for use throughout winter.

Carrots

Carrots can be very satisfying for new gardeners to grow. You can pull as many or as few as you need, and they will taste amazing.

Choose a sunny spot with light, well-draining soil. Dig the area thoroughly, removing stones and breaking up any clumps. Avoid adding fresh manure as this can cause carrots to 'fork'. If soil is heavy, consider raised beds or mixing in some sand to improve drainage.

Sow seeds directly into the ground from early spring to late summer. Make shallow drills about 1cm deep and 15cm apart. Sow seeds thinly along the drills and cover lightly with soil. Water gently but thoroughly. Keep soil consistently moist until germination to prevent a tough seed coat from forming. Once established, water deeply once a week in dry spells

When seedlings are about 2.5cm tall, thin to 5cm apart. Thin again to 10cm apart when plants are larger.

Carrots generally don't need additional feeding if soil is prepared well. and over-fertilising can lead to forked roots.

Keep the area weed-free, especially while plants are young.

Common problems

Carrot fly: Lay fleece or fine netting over plants to prevent these pests. Thin seedlings gently and on a still day to avoid attracting carrot fly with the scent.
Forking: Caused by stony soil or fresh manure. Prepare soil well before planting.

Stony ground and over-fertilising can lead to forking.

- Start with shorter, stubbier varieties like 'Paris Market' or 'Chantenay' as they're easier to grow in heavier soils.
- Sow small batches every 2-3 weeks for a continuous harvest.
- Harvest regularly, even if small, to make space for developing carrots and ensure a continuous supply.

CARROTS CAN BE EASIER IN CONTAINERS

Choose the right container, at least 25cm deep for most varieties (deeper for longer types). Ensure good drainage holes.

Use a light, well-draining potting mix. Mix in some sand to improve drainage and prevent soil compaction. Sow seeds thinly, about 1cm deep. Space rows about 5cm apart.

Keep soil consistently moist but not waterlogged, and water gently to avoid displacing seeds. Thin seedlings to about 5cm apart when they're large enough to handle.

Place containers in a sunny spot and protect from strong winds. No additional fertiliser is usually needed if using a good potting mix.

Begin harvesting when carrots reach desired size, usually after about 12-16 weeks.

Kale

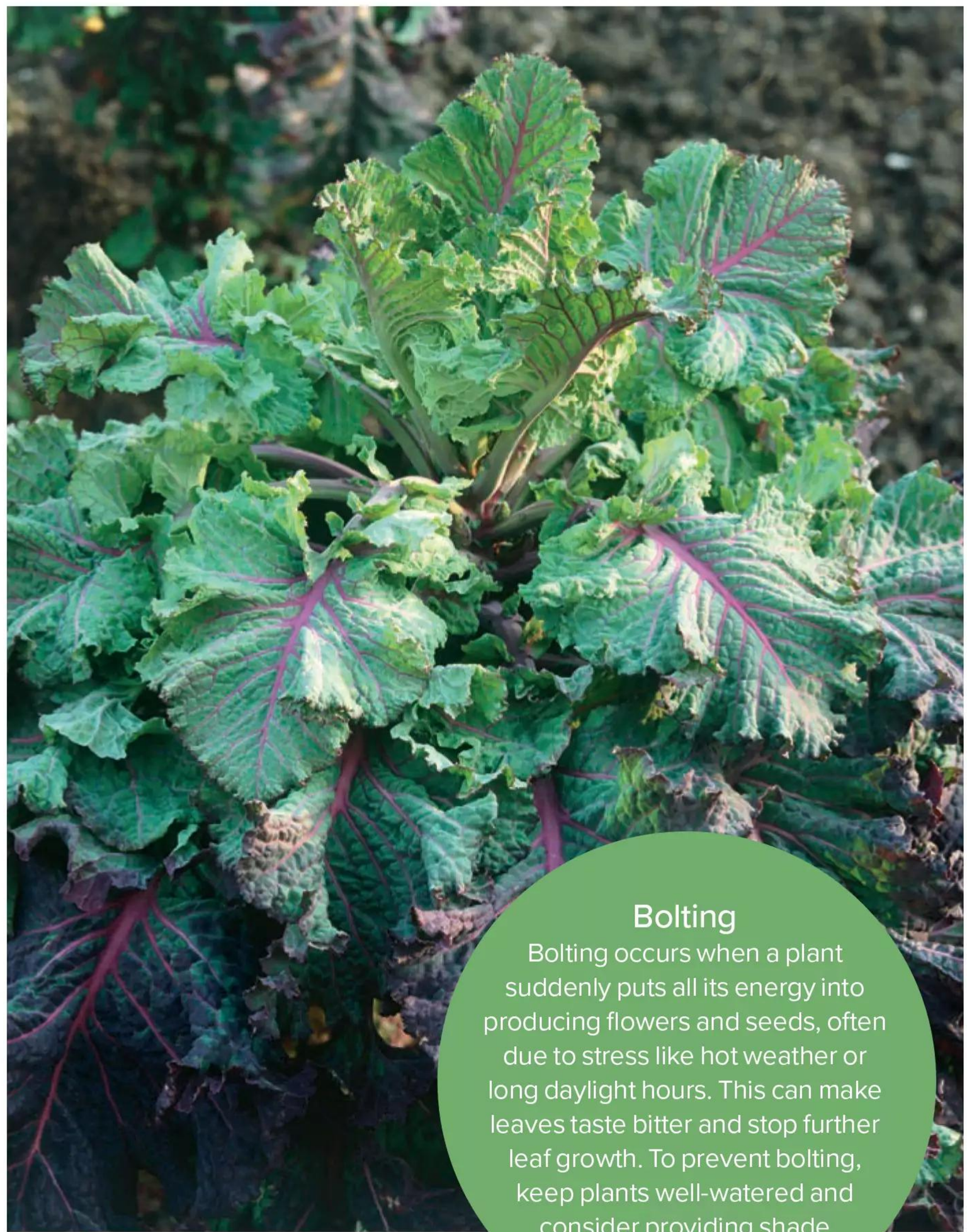
Kale is a cool-season crop that's relatively easy to grow and can withstand frost, making it perfect for UK gardens. Plant a variety of types to enjoy different flavours, textures, and uses in the kitchen. Try making crisps from curly kale, use Cavolo Nero for soups, and Red Russian for colourful salads. Choose a sunny to partially-shaded spot. Kale prefers well-drained, fertile soil rich in organic matter. Dig in plenty of compost or well-rotted manure before planting. Aim for a slightly alkaline soil pH (6.5-6.8).

Sow seeds directly outdoors from March to June, or start seeds indoors 4-6 weeks before the last expected frost. Sow seeds 1cm deep and 45cm apart. If transplanting seedlings, space them 45cm apart in rows 60cm apart.

Keep soil consistently moist, especially during dry spells. Water deeply once a week if there's no rain.

Apply a balanced, general-purpose fertiliser when planting. Feed again with a high-nitrogen fertiliser about 6-8 weeks after planting.

Apply a layer of organic mulch to retain moisture and suppress weeds. Use fleece or netting to protect young plants from pigeons and cabbage white butterflies.



Bolting

Bolting occurs when a plant suddenly puts all its energy into producing flowers and seeds, often due to stress like hot weather or long daylight hours. This can make leaves taste bitter and stop further leaf growth. To prevent bolting, keep plants well-watered and consider providing shade in hot weather

Harvesting

Start harvesting when leaves are about the size of your hand, typically 6-8 weeks after transplanting.

Pick outer leaves first, allowing the centre to continue producing.

Kale can be harvested well into winter, with frost often improving the flavour.

Brassicas need to be protected from pests, with netting or fleece.

Container growing

Use a pot at least 30cm deep and wide, with good drainage. Use a high-quality, moisture-retentive potting mix. One or two kale plants per large container is enough.

Kale is a forgiving plant that can provide a harvest over a long period, making it an excellent choice for beginners.

Common problems

Cabbage white butterflies: Check undersides of leaves for eggs and cater pillars.

Clubroot: Avoid in future by improving drainage and increasing soil pH.

Aphids: Wash off with a strong jet of water or use insecticidal soap.

Top tips

- Harvest regularly to encourage continued production.
- In summer, provide some shade to prevent bolting .
- Rotate your kale crop yearly to prevent disease build-up in the soil.
- Kale is sweeter after a frost.

Tomatoes

There's a huge range of tomato varieties available and what you choose will depend on whether you want tomatoes for eating or cooking, and how much space you have. From scarlet, orange or yellow tumbling cherry tomatoes, to Italian plum and beefsteak for cooking, and with salad tomatoes in almost every colour possible – including stripes – you're bound to find something to suit you.

Choosing varieties

Bush (determinate) varieties: Compact, good for containers or hanging baskets.
Cordon (indeterminate) varieties: Tall, need staking, often more productive.

Starting seeds

Sow indoors in March or early April using seed compost in small pots or trays. Keep at 18-21°C for germination. Once sprouted, provide plenty of light.

Harden off the seedlings gradually over a week in May. Plant outside in late May or early June, when the risk of frost has passed. Space bush types 45cm apart, and cordons 60cm apart. Plant deeply, burying the stem up to the first set of leaves.

Water regularly, keeping the soil consistently moist but not waterlogged. Water at the base of the plant to avoid wetting leaves.

Start feeding with a high-potash fertiliser when the first truss of flowers appears. Feed every 1-2 weeks throughout the growing season. Support cordon varieties with sturdy stakes or canes, tying the main stem to the support as it grows.

Cordon tomatoes need the little shoots that grow in the junctions of the stems removed.

Tumbling varieties are perfect for hanging baskets.

Pruning

For cordon types, remove side shoots regularly. Bush varieties generally don't need pruning.

Pinching out

When the plant has 4-5 trusses, pinch out (remove) the growing tip to focus energy on fruit production.

Container growing

Use large pots (at least 30cm diameter) with good drainage. Use one plant per pot for most varieties and plant in a good quality, peat-free potting compost.

Start harvesting when fruits are fully coloured and slightly soft to the touch. Pick regularly to encourage more fruit production.

Top tips

- Start with cherry tomatoes like 'Gardener's Delight' or 'Sungold', which are easier to grow and less prone to problems.
- Grow in a greenhouse or polytunnel if possible, for higher yields and fewer disease issues.

Common problems

Blight: Remove affected leaves promptly; choose blight-resistant varieties.
Blossom end rot: Caused by irregular watering or calcium deficiency. Water consistently and add lime to the soil if needed.
Whitefly: Use yellow sticky traps or introduce natural predators like ladybirds.

Peppers and chillies

Peppers and chillies are warm-season crops that can add colour and flavour to your garden and kitchen. In good summers, peppers will grow outside, but it can safer to plant them in pots so they can either be raised in a greenhouse, or moved indoors if temperatures take a dive.

Good starter varieties

Sweet peppers: 'California Wonder', 'Gypsy', 'Marconi'
Chillies: 'Jalapeno', 'Apache', 'Hungarian Hot Wax'

Sow indoors 6-8 weeks in February or March, using seed compost in small pots or trays. Keep at 18-21°C for germination. Once sprouted, provide plenty of light.

Harden off seedlings gradually over 7-10 days in May. Plant outside in late May or early June when all risk of frost has passed. Space plants 45-60cm apart in a sunny, sheltered spot.

Water regularly, keeping soil consistently moist but not waterlogged. Reduce watering slightly once fruits start to ripen.

Start feeding with a high-potash fertiliser when the first flowers appear. Feed every 1-2 weeks throughout the growing season.

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Use small stakes or cages to support plants as they grow. Pinch out the growing tips of young plants to encourage bushiness. Remove the first flowers to promote stronger plant growth.

Container growing

Use pots at least 30cm diameter with good drainage. One plant per pot for most varieties. Use a good quality, peat-free potting compost.

Sweet peppers can be harvested when green or left to ripen to red, yellow, or orange.

Chillies can be picked at any stage, but leaving them to ripen fully will increase heat and flavour.

Use scissors to cut fruits to avoid damaging the plant. Don't touch your eyes after handling chillies!

Common problems

Blossom end rot: Caused by irregular watering or calcium deficiency. Water consistently and add lime to the soil if needed.
Aphids: Wash off with a strong jet of water or use insecticidal soap.
Pepper weevil: Remove affected fruits and practice crop rotation.

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Blossom end rot is not contagious, but can be seen in multiple plants if they're grown in the same conditions.

Top tips

- Place a clear plastic bottle with the bottom cut off over young plants to act as a mini greenhouse.
- Increase humidity around plants by misting or placing on a pebble tray filled with water.

Radishes

Radishes are one of the fastest and easiest crops for beginners to grow, often ready to harvest in just 4-6 weeks. These crisp, peppery roots are perfect for adding a bit of zing to salads. Sow seeds thinly, about 1cm deep and 2.5cm apart, in rows 15cm apart. They prefer cool conditions, so sow small batches every couple of weeks from March to August for a continuous crop. Keep soil consistently moist and thin seedlings to 5cm apart when they're large enough to handle. Harvest when the roots are about the size of a large marble. Popular varieties include 'French Breakfast' for its elongated shape and mild flavour, and 'Cherry Belle' for its classic round, red appearance. Radishes are also excellent companion plants, helping to deter pests from other crops in your vegetable patch.

Remember... Embrace imperfection. Home-grown vegetables may not look perfect, but they often taste better than store-bought ones, and you'll gain immense satisfaction from knowing you've grown them yourself

Companion planting

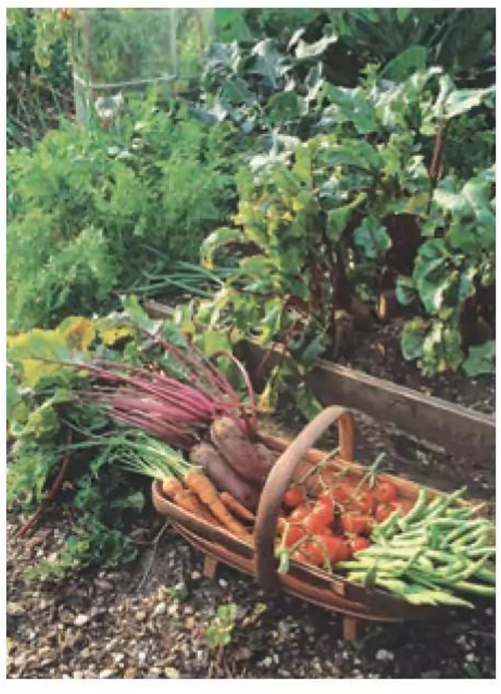
Companion planting involves growing certain plants near each other for mutual benefit. This can improve growth and flavour, deter pests, attract beneficial insects, and maximise space usage.

Companion planting combinations

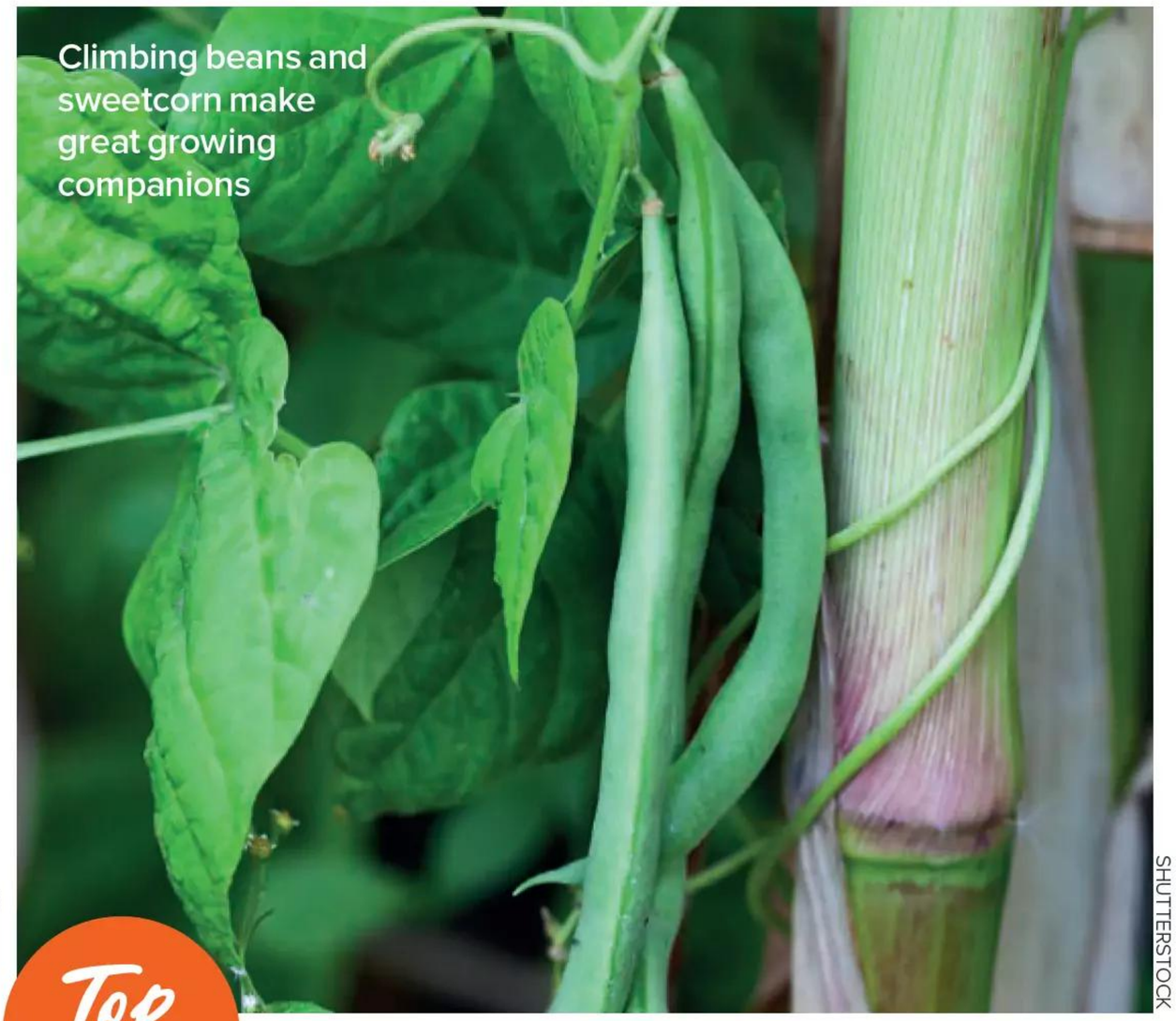
- **Tomatoes and basil**
  Basil may improve tomato flavour and repel pests
- **Carrots and onions**
  Onion scent deters carrot fly
- **Beans and sweetcorn**
  Beans fix nitrogen in soil, benefiting sweetcorn, which provides support for the beans to climb
- **Lettuce and tall plants**
  Tall plants provide shade for lettuce in hot weather
- **Marigolds and various vegetables**
  Marigolds deter many pests and attract pollinators

Plants to keep apart

- **Potatoes and tomatoes**
  Both are susceptible to blight and can spread it to each other
- **Beans and onions**
  Onions can stunt bean growth
- **Cucumbers and aromatic herbs**
  Strong herb scents can affect cucumber flavour



Research plant combinations before planting



Climbing beans and sweetcorn make great growing companions

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Top tips

- Use quality seeds or seedlings. Buy from reputable suppliers or save seeds from your best plants
- Stay on top of weeding, watering, and pest control
- Pick vegetables when they're ripe to encourage continued production
- Extend the season – Use cloches, cold frames, or polytunnels to protect crops and extend the growing season

Herbs

Herbs are a wonderful addition to any garden, and many have medicinal benefits as well as their uses in the kitchen. They're generally easy to grow, require minimal space, and can thrive indoors and outdoors.

Outdoors

Location: Most herbs prefer full sun (6+ hours daily), but some, like mint and parsley, will tolerate partial shade.
Soil: Well-draining, moderately fertile soil. Many Mediterranean herbs prefer poor, sandy soil.
Planting: Space plants according to their mature size, and group herbs with similar water needs together.
Watering: Most herbs prefer soil to dry slightly between waterings. Avoid overwatering, which can lead to root rot.
Feeding: Light feeding with balanced, organic fertiliser in spring. Over-fertilising can reduce flavour intensity.
Maintenance: Regular pruning encourages bushy growth. Remove flower heads to prolong leaf production (except when growing for seed).

Indoors

Light: Choose a sunny windowsill, ideally south-facing. Supplement with grow lights if natural light is insufficient.
Containers: Use pots with plenty of drainage holes. Ensure pots are large enough for root growth.

Harvest herbs regularly, cutting just above a leaf joint to encourage bushy growth. Use fresh for the best flavour, or dry and store for later use. The more you pick, the more your herbs will produce!

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Soil: Use a well-draining potting mix. Add perlite or sand for Mediterranean herbs.
Watering: Water when the top inch of soil feels dry. Ensure good drainage to prevent waterlogging.
Humidity: Most herbs prefer higher humidity. Mist leaves or use a pebble tray filled with water.
Temperature: Most herbs prefer cooler room temperatures (15-21°C). Avoid placing near radiators or cold draughts.
Feeding: Feed monthly with a diluted, balanced liquid fertiliser during the growing season.

Harvesting

- Harvest in the morning after the dew has dried but before the heat of the day. Pick leaves just before flowering for the best flavour.
- Use clean, sharp scissors or secateurs. For leafy herbs, cut stems close to a leaf intersection. Never remove more than one-third of the plant at once.
- Regular harvesting encourages bushier growth. Harvest outer leaves first, allowing the inner leaves to continue growing

Preserving

Drying: Tie herbs in small bundles and hang them upside down in a warm, dry, well-ventilated area. Alternatively, use a food dehydrator or oven on the lowest setting. Store dried herbs in airtight containers away from light
Freezing: Wash and pat dry herbs; remove leaves from stems. Freeze in ice cube trays with a little water or oil. Once frozen, transfer to freezer bags
Herb butter: Mix chopped herbs into softened butter. Shape into a log, wrap in cling film, and freeze
Herb oil: Infuse olive oil with fresh herbs. Store in the refrigerator and use within a week, or freeze for longer storage
Herb salt: Mix finely chopped herbs with coarse salt. Dry the mixture and store it in an airtight container
Herb vinegar: Infuse vinegar with fresh herbs. Store in a cool, dark place for several months

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Basil

✿ **Flavour:** Sweet, peppery, with a hint of anise
✿ **Uses:** Italian dishes, pesto, salads, Thai cuisine
✿ **Growing tips:** Loves warmth and sun, pinch out flower buds to prolong leaf production

Basil comes in a wide variety of cultivars, each with its unique flavour profile:
Sweet (Genovese): The most common variety, with large, cup-shaped leaves. It's the classic choice for pesto and Italian dishes.
Thai: Has a spicy, anise-like flavour. Essential in many Southeast Asian dishes.
Lemon: Offers a distinct citrusy aroma and flavour, great for fish dishes and salads.
Purple: Similar flavour to sweet basil but with a striking colour, useful for visual appeal in dishes and vinegars.
Cinnamon: Has a spicy, cinnamon-like taste, excellent for fruit salads and teas.
Greek: Compact plant with small leaves, intense flavour, ideal for container growing.

In the garden, basil thrives in warm, sunny conditions and rich, well-draining soil. It's sensitive to cold and should be planted after all danger of frost has passed. Regular harvesting encourages bushier growth and increased yield. Pinching off flower buds as they appear will extend the plant's leaf production phase.

For the best flavour, add basil leaves at the end of cooking. The leaves can also be frozen or used to infuse oils. When growing basil, consider companion planting with tomatoes – they're said to enhance each other's flavour and growth.

Rosemary

✿ **Flavour:** Aromatic, pine-like, slightly bitter
✿ **Uses:** Roast meats, Mediterranean dishes, herbal teas
✿ **Growing tips:** Well-draining soil, full sun, drought-tolerant once established

While there aren't as many distinct varieties of rosemary as there are of basil, there are still several cultivars with unique characteristics:
Upright (*Rosmarinus officinalis*): The most common type, with erect stems and dark green leaves.
Prostrate (*Rosmarinus officinalis*' Prostratus'): A low-growing, spreading variety ideal for ground cover or hanging baskets.
Arp: Known for its cold hardiness, it can survive temperatures down to -10°F (-23°C).
Tuscan blue: It has strong upright growth and pale blue flowers and is good for hedges.
Golden: Features yellow-tinged leaves, adding visual interest to gardens.
Pine-scented: Has a particularly strong pine-like aroma.

Rosemary prefers well-draining, slightly alkaline soil and full sun. Once established, it is quite drought-tolerant, making it an excellent choice for water-wise gardens. It can be grown in pots and brought indoors during winter in colder regions.

Use sparingly, in cooking as its flavour can be overpowering. The woody stems can be used as aromatic skewers for grilling, imparting additional flavour to meats and vegetables.

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Thyme

✿ **Flavour:** Earthy, slightly minty, with hints of lemon or caraway depending on the variety
✿ **Uses:** Soups, stews, roast meats, Mediterranean and French cuisine
✿ **Growing tips:** Likes poor, well-draining soil, full sun

Thyme comes in many varieties, each with its own unique flavour profile and growth habit:
Common Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*): The standard culinary thyme with small grey-green leaves.
Lemon: Has a distinct citrusy aroma and flavour, excellent for fish dishes
Orange: Similar to lemon thyme but with an orange scent
Caraway: Offers a flavour reminiscent of caraway seeds
Woolly: More ornamental, with fuzzy grey leaves and a mild flavour
Creeping: Low-growing variety often used as a ground cover
Silver: Features leaves edged in silver, adding visual interest to gardens

Thyme is relatively easy to grow, preferring full sun and well-draining, even poor soil. In fact, soil that's too rich can lead to decreased flavour intensity. It's drought-tolerant once established and can even be used as an aromatic ground cover or between pavers in a garden path.

Thyme is incredibly versatile in the kitchen. It's a key component of bouquet garni and its flavour holds up well to long cooking times, perfect for slow-cooked stews and braised meats. Fresh thyme leaves can also add depth to salads and vegetable dishes.

Mint

✿ **Flavour:** Cool, refreshing, with a sweet undertone
✿ **Uses:** Teas, cocktails, Middle Eastern dishes, desserts
✿ **Growing tips:** Grow in containers to control spreading, partial shade

Mint is available in a wide range of varieties, each with its own distinct flavour profile:
Peppermint: Strong, cool flavour with a high menthol content. Great for teas and desserts
Spearmint: Milder and sweeter than peppermint, commonly used in cooking
Chocolate: Has a subtle chocolate aroma, excellent for desserts
Apple: Mild flavour with a fruity note, good in salads and teas
Pineapple: Features variegated leaves and a tropical flavour
Moroccan: Often used for making traditional mint tea
Ginger: Offers a spicy ginger note along with a mint flavour
Banana: Has a fruity aroma reminiscent of bananas

When it comes to growing mint, all varieties share a vigorous, spreading growth habit. For this reason, growing mint in containers is often recommended to prevent it from taking over the garden. It prefers partial shade and moist, rich soil, though it can tolerate a range of conditions.

In cooking, mint is incredibly versatile. It's a staple in Middle Eastern cuisine, is a classic dessert flavouring and is widely used in drinks, from teas to mojitos.

Pick leaves from the top of the plant to encourage bushier growth.

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Chives

✿ **Flavour:** Mild onion, with a hint of garlic
✿ **Uses:** Garnish, salads, potato dishes, egg dishes
✿ **Growing tips:** Moist soil, full sun or partial shade

Chives are slender, grass-like herbs that belong to the allium family, which includes onions and garlic. Their hollow green stems have a mild, onion-like flavour with a subtle hint of garlic.

Chives are a hardy perennial that's as attractive in the garden as it is useful in the kitchen, where it has many culinary uses. They're often used as a fresh garnish, adding a pop of fresh green colour and a mild onion flavour to dishes. They pair well with egg dishes, mixed into soft cheeses or butter, sprinkled over baked potatoes, or added to salads.

The edible purple flowers can also be used as a beautiful and flavourful garnish.

In the garden, chives are relatively easy to grow. They prefer moist, rich soil and can thrive in full sun or partial shade. They grow in clumps and can be divided every few years to propagate new plants, although they a good self-seeders, so you may find them popping up all over the place.

They're also well-suited to container growing, making them a good choice for small spaces or indoor herb gardens, and can help deter pests, making chives a good companion plant for many vegetables.

When harvesting, cut the leaves about 5cm (2") from the base, encouraging new growth. Chives are best used fresh but can be frozen or dried for use later.

Coriander (Cilantro)

✿ **Flavour:** Citrusy, slightly peppery, with a unique, love-it-or-hate-it taste
✿ **Uses:** Asian and Mexican cuisine, salads, salsas, curries
✿ **Growing tips:** Cool weather, succession plant for continuous harvest

Coriander, also known as cilantro, is an annual herb used in cuisines worldwide. The leaves (cilantro) and seeds (coriander) are both used in cooking, each offering a distinct flavour. The leaves are fresh, citrusy, and slightly peppery, while the seeds have a warmer, nutty, and spicy flavour. In the UK, both the leaves and the seeds are known as coriander.

Fresh cilantro leaves are a staple in many Mexican, Indian, and Southeast Asian dishes. They're often used in salsas, chutneys, and as a garnish for soups and curries. The ground seeds are a key component of many spice blends, including garam masala and curry powder.

Growing coriander can be a bit tricky, as the plant is sensitive to heat and will quickly bolt (produce seeds) in warm weather. It prefers cool conditions and moist, well-draining soil. For a continuous harvest, succession planting every few weeks is recommended. Coriander can be grown for its leaves, or left to produce seeds.

Interestingly, some people have a genetic quirk that makes cilantro taste like soap!

When harvesting, cut the outer leaves at the base of the plant. If allowing the plant to go to seed, collect the seeds when they turn brown but before they fall off.

SHUTTERSTOCK

SHUTTERSTOCK

Sage

✿ **Flavour:** Earthy, slightly peppery, with hints of mint and lemon
✿ **Uses:** Stuffings, sausages, poultry dishes, teas
✿ **Growing tips:** Well-draining soil, full sun

Sage is a woody perennial herb with soft, greyish-green leaves that offer a warm, earthy flavour with subtle notes of lemon and mint. It's been used in the kitchen and for medicinal purposes for thousands of years and is a popular herb in many cuisines.

It is best known as a flavouring for poultry and stuffing. Sage's robust flavour pairs well with fatty meats, cheese, and in hearty bean dishes. It can be used fresh or dried, with dried leaves generally having a more intense flavour.

Growing sage is relatively straightforward. It prefers well-draining soil and full sun and is drought-tolerant once established. In fact, its flavour is often more intense when grown in slightly harsh conditions. It's a good companion plant for brassicas and carrots, as it can help repel pests.

The plant also has ornamental value, with some varieties offering attractive purple or variegated leaves. Sage flowers are edible and can add a beautiful touch to salads or as a garnish. The plant is also known for attracting pollinators, making it a valuable addition to any garden.

When harvesting, it's best to pick leaves in the morning after the dew has dried but before the heat of the day. Young leaves tend to have the best flavour. Sage can be used fresh or dried for long-term storage. It's a strong herb, so use it sparingly.

Dill

✿ **Flavour:** Tangy, slightly sweet, with notes of caraway and anise
✿ **Uses:** Fish dishes, pickles, Eastern European cuisine, potato salads
✿ **Growing tips:** Well-draining soil, full sun, tolerates cool weather

Dill is a delicate annual herb with feathery green leaves and umbrella-shaped yellow flower heads that attract beneficial insects like wasps and butterflies. Both the leaves and the seeds are used in cooking, each with a distinct but related flavour. The leaves have a fresh, tangy taste with hints of anise, while the seeds are more aromatic with a slight caraway-like flavour.

Dill is best known for its use in pickling. It's also a classic pairing with fish, especially in Scandinavian cuisine, and is widely used in Eastern European dishes like borscht and potato salads. The fresh leaves can be used as a garnish or added to salads, while the seeds are often used in spice blends and bread.

Growing dill is relatively easy, but it has some specific preferences. It likes well-draining soil and full sun, and while it can tolerate cool weather, it's sensitive to frost. Dill has a tap root, so it's best sown directly where you want it, rather than transplanted. It's a good companion plant for cucumbers and onions but should be kept away from carrots as they can cross-pollinate.

You can pick the leaves once the plant is about 8 inches tall. Use leaves fresh or freeze them, as they lose flavour when dried. For seeds, let the plant flower and harvest when brown.

- Start with easy-to-grow herbs like basil, mint, and chives
- Harvest regularly to encourage continued growth
- Experiment with different varieties of herbs
- Use companion planting techniques (eg, plant basil near tomatoes)
- Consider perennial herbs for long-term harvests
- Rotate annual herbs in your garden to prevent soil depletion
- Learn the specific needs of each herb for best results

Fenugreek

✿ **Flavour:** Nutty, slightly sweet, with hints of maple and celery
✿ **Uses:** Indian cuisine, Middle Eastern dishes, spice blends, teas
✿ **Growing tips:** Well-draining soil, full sun, drought-tolerant

Fenugreek is an annual herb native to the Mediterranean region and Asia. Both the leaves and seeds of the fenugreek plant are used in cooking, each offering a distinct flavour profile:
Leaves (Methi): Fresh or dried leaves have a bitter-sweet flavour, similar to celery or fennel.
Seeds: The small, golden-brown seeds have a stronger, nuttier flavour with notes of maple and caramel.

Varieties of fenugreek are not as diverse as some other herbs, but there are a few cultivars:
Common: The most widely used variety for both culinary and medicinal purposes.
Methi Kasuri: A smaller-leaved variety, often used dried in Indian cuisine.
Golden: A variety with golden-yellow seeds, popular in Middle Eastern cooking.
Ethiopian: Used primarily for its seeds, which are larger than common fenugreek.

Fenugreek is a staple in many Indian dishes. The leaves are often used in curries, vegetable dishes, and Indian flatbreads like methi paratha. The seeds are a key component of many spice blends, including garam masala and panch phoron (Indian five-spice). It is also used in Middle Eastern cuisine and is a primary flavouring in imitation maple syrup.

Growing fenugreek is relatively straightforward. It prefers well-draining soil and full sun but can tolerate partial shade. The plant is drought-tolerant once established. Fenugreek can be grown for its leaves, harvested young for salads, mature for cooking, or left to produce seeds.

When using fenugreek in cooking, keep in mind that a little goes a long way. The seeds are often toasted before use to enhance their nutty flavour. They can also be ground into a powder or sprouted for use in salads, where they have a distinctive fresh pea-shoot flavour. The leaves can be used fresh or dried, with dried leaves having a more concentrated flavour.

When growing fenugreek, sow seeds directly in the garden after the last frost. The plants grow quickly and can be harvested for leaves in about four weeks. If you want to eat the shoots, use succession sowing for a longer-lasting supply. If you're growing it for seeds, allow the pods to fully dry on the plant before harvesting.

Don't forget...

Whether you're growing a few pots on a windowsill or have a dedicated herb garden outdoors, with proper care, harvesting, and preservation, you can enjoy the flavours of your herb garden year-round

Indoor gardening

Indoor gardening brings nature into your home, offering year-round greenery. From houseplants to herbs and compact vegetables, growing indoors provides unparalleled climate control, protecting plants from frost and heatwaves. A controlled environment allows for a wider variety of plants to thrive. Pest management is simpler too, with issues easier to spot and address without harsh chemicals.

Convenience is a key advantage – ven in small flats, you can make use of windowsills and hanging baskets, and indoor plants typically require less water, aiding conservation efforts. Growing plants inside contributes to a cleaner home environment since many of them purify the air and, for edibles, your produce is free from outdoor pollutants. Indoor gardening gives you great flexibility in plant choice too, unrestricted by local climate. It's also less physically demanding, making it suitable for all ages and abilities.

Care

Caring for indoor plants requires attention to several key factors. Light is crucial, and understanding each plant's specific needs is essential. While some plants thrive in bright, direct sunlight, others prefer shadier spots. For those that need protection from strong sun, using sheer curtains can effectively filter the light.

Watering is another vital aspect of plant care. A good rule of thumb is to water when the top inch of soil feels dry to the touch. However, it's important to ensure your pots have adequate drainage holes to prevent waterlogging, which can lead to root rot.

Humidity plays a significant role in the health of many indoor plants, particularly those native to tropical environments. To increase humidity, try grouping plants together or using a pebble tray filled with water. Most houseplants are comfortable in the same temperature range as humans, typically between 15-24°C (60-75°F). However, it's wise to keep plants away from drafty windows or heat sources like radiators, which can cause stress.

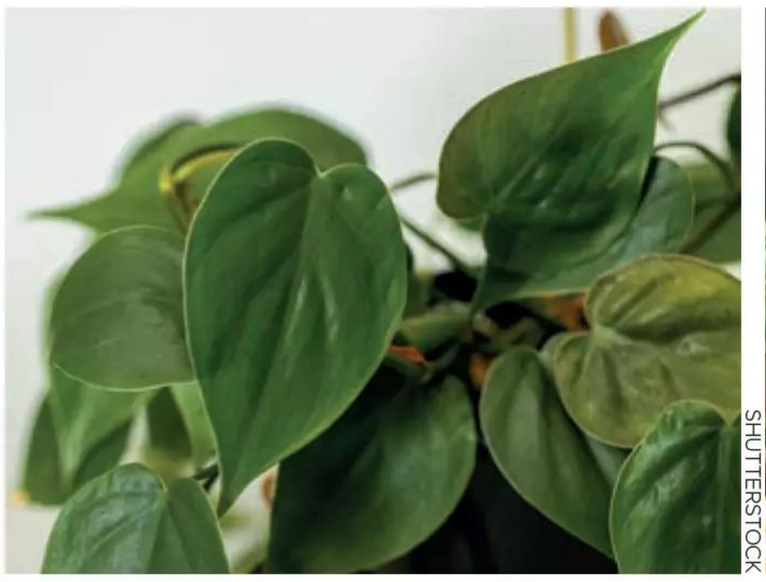
During the growing season, typically spring and summer, plants benefit from regular feeding. A balanced, water-soluble fertiliser used at half-strength usually works well, or you can opt for specialised houseplant feeds. Remember, it's better to under-fertilise than over-fertilise, as too much can damage your plants.

- Use a moisture meter to avoid over or under-watering
- Repot plants when they outgrow their containers
- Use quality potting mix specifically formulated for indoor plants

EASY CARE

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Chlorophytum comosum* (Spider plant)**
Thrives in bright, indirect light. Water when the top inch of soil feels dry. Produces 'spiderettes' for easy propagation.


SHUTTERSTOCK

***Philodendron hederaceum* (Heartleaf Philodendron)**
Adapts to low or moderate light conditions. Allow soil to dry slightly between waterings. Excellent trailing plant; easy to propagate.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Aglaonema (Chinese evergreen)
Tolerates low light conditions
Keep soil lightly moist; tolerates occasional dry spells. Available in various leaf patterns and colours.

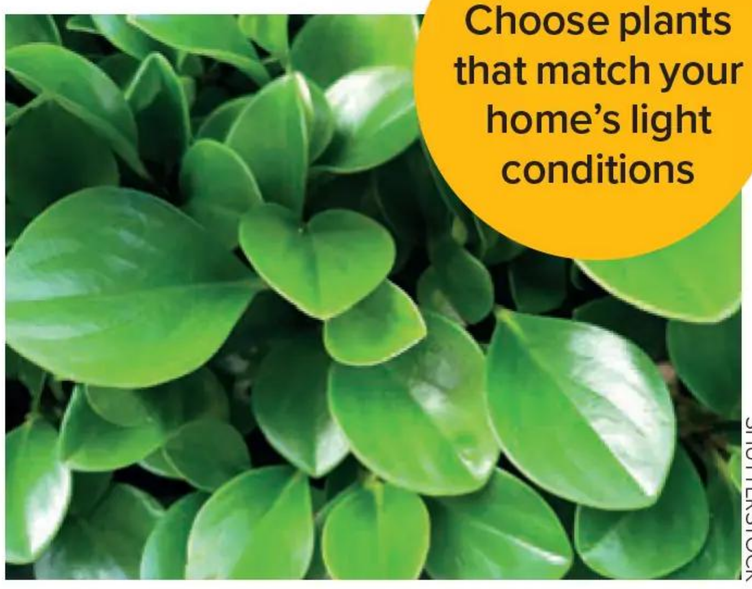
Choose plants that match your home's light conditions

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Dracaena marginata* (Dragon tree)**
Adapts to various light conditions. Water when the top inch of soil is dry. Tolerant of irregular watering and low humidity.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Nephrolepis exaltata* (Boston fern)**
Prefers bright, indirect light. Likes consistently moist soil; mist regularly. Thrives in humid environments like bathrooms.


SHUTTERSTOCK

***Peperomia obtusifolia* (Baby rubber plant)**
Thrives in moderate to bright indirect light. Allow soil to dry between waterings. Tolerant of average indoor humidity levels.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Beaucarnea recurvata* (Ponytail palm)**
Thrives in bright, indirect light. Drought-tolerant; water sparingly. Unique appearance with a bulbous trunk and cascading leaves.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Tradescantia zebrina
Thrives in moderate to bright indirect light. Keep soil consistently moist but not waterlogged. Fast-growing, ideal for hanging baskets.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Schefflera arboricola* (Dwarf umbrella tree)**
Prefers moderate to bright indirect light. Allow soil to dry slightly between waterings. Prune regularly.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Rotate plants regularly to ensure even growth

Monstera deliciosa **(Swiss cheese plant)**
Prefers bright, indirect light. Allow soil to dry between waterings. Enjoys high humidity, benefits from misting.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Ficus lyrata **(Fiddle leaf fig)**
Needs bright, consistent light. Water when the top inch of soil is dry. Sensitive to drafts and temperature changes.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Calathea orbifolia
Thrives in moderate to bright indirect light. Keep soil consistently moist. Requires high humidity; use a pebble tray.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Alocasia 'Polly'
Prefers bright, indirect light. Keep soil lightly moist, never soggy. Enjoys warm temperatures and high humidity.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Philodendron bipinnatifidum **(Tree Philodendron)**
Tolerates low to bright indirect light. Allow top few inches of soil to dry between waterings. Responds well to regular misting.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Strelitzia nicolai (**Bird of Paradise)**
Needs bright light, can tolerate some direct sun. Water when the top 2 inches of soil are dry. Fertilise monthly during the growing season.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Maranta leuconeura **(Prayer plant)**
Thrives in moderate to bright indirect light. Prefers consistently moist soil, but not waterlogged. Enjoys high humidity; mist regularly. Known for its striking leaf movements, closing up at night.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Zamioculcas zamiifolia **(ZZ plant)**
Thrives in low to bright indirect light. Very drought-tolerant, water sparingly. Ideal for beginners, tolerates neglect

SHUTTERSTOCK

Chamaedorea elegans **(Parlour palm)**
Prefers moderate, indirect light. Keep soil lightly moist. Tolerates average home humidity.

CACTI AND SUCCULENTS

SHUTTERSTOCK

Echeveria elegans **(Mexican snowball)**
Needs bright light; give some direct sunlight. Water sparingly when soil is completely dry. Ideal for small pots or rock gardens.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Crassula ovata **(Jade plant)**
Prefers bright, indirect light. Allow soil to dry out between waterings. Tolerates average home humidity well.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Haworthia fasciata **(Zebra plant)**
Thrives in bright, indirect light. Water when soil is dry; reduce in winter. Perfect for small spaces or desktops.

Inspect plants regularly for signs of pests or diseases

SHUTTERSTOCK

Sedum morganianum **(Burro's tail)**
Requires bright light, some direct sun is good. Water thoroughly but infrequently. Lovely in hanging baskets; handle gently to avoid losing leaves.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Mammillaria crinita **(Pincushion cactus)** Needs maximum light, including direct sun. Water sparingly, allowing soil to dry completely. Flowers readily when mature.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Aloe vera
Prefers bright, indirect light. Allow soil to dry between thorough waterings. Useful for its medicinal gel; easy to propagate.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Euphorbia trigona **(African milk tree)**
Thrives in bright light, including some direct sun. Water moderately in summer, sparingly in winter. Mind the milky sap, which can irritate skin.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Schlumbergera **(Christmas cactus)**
Likes bright, indirect light. Keep soil slightly moist during growing season. Needs cooler temps and longer nights to bloom.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Senecio rowleyanus **(String of pearls)**
Enjoys bright, indirect light. Water thoroughly but infrequently. Stunning in hanging planters; mind its fragile stems.

FLOWERING PLANTS

SHUTTERSTOCK

Phalaenopsis orchid
Thrives in bright, indirect light. Water when potting medium is nearly dry. Prefers high humidity; mist regularly or use a pebble tray.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Anthurium andraeanum* (Flamingo flower)**
Needs bright, indirect light. Keep soil consistently moist, not waterlogged. Enjoys warm temperatures and high humidity.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Spathiphyllum* (Peace lily)**
Tolerates low light, but flowers best in bright, indirect light. Water when top of soil feels dry. Droops dramatically when thirsty, perks up quickly after watering.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Kalanchoe blossfeldiana
Prefers bright light, some direct sun is beneficial. Allow soil to dry between thorough waterings. Flowers for weeks; prune after blooming to encourage bushiness.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Begonia rex
Likes bright, indirect light. Keep soil lightly moist; water when top inch is dry. Enjoys high humidity; avoid wetting leaves to prevent spotting.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Saintpaulia* (African violet)**
Thrives in moderate to bright indirect light. Water from the bottom when soil surface feels dry. Prefers warm temperatures and moderate humidity.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Hoya carnosa* (Wax plant)**
Enjoys bright, indirect light. Allow soil to dry out between waterings. Slow-growing but long-lived; very fragrant flowers.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Cyclamen persicum
Prefers cool temperatures and bright, indirect light. Water from the bottom when soil is dry; avoid getting leaves wet. Goes dormant in summer; reduce watering during this time.

GETTY IMAGES

***Guzmania lingulata* (Bromeliad)** Likes bright, indirect light. Keep central cup filled with water, changing regularly. Flowers once in its lifetime, then produces offsets (pups) for propagation.

FOLIAGE

ALAMY

Prune and pinch back plants to encourage bushy growth

***Ficus elastica* (Rubber plant)**
Thrives in bright, indirect light. Allow top inch of soil to dry between waterings. Wipe leaves occasionally to keep them dust-free and shiny.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Dieffenbachia (Dumb Cane)
Tolerates low to moderate light. Keep soil consistently moist, but not soggy. Toxic if ingested; keep away from pets and children.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Ctenanthe burle-marxii* (Fishbone prayer plant)**
Prefers medium to low indirect light. Keep soil consistently moist but not waterlogged. Enjoys high humidity; benefits from regular misting.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Aspidistra elatior* (Cast iron plant)**
Thrives in low light conditions. Water when top inch of soil is dry. Very hardy; tolerates neglect and temperature fluctuations.

SHUTTERSTOCK

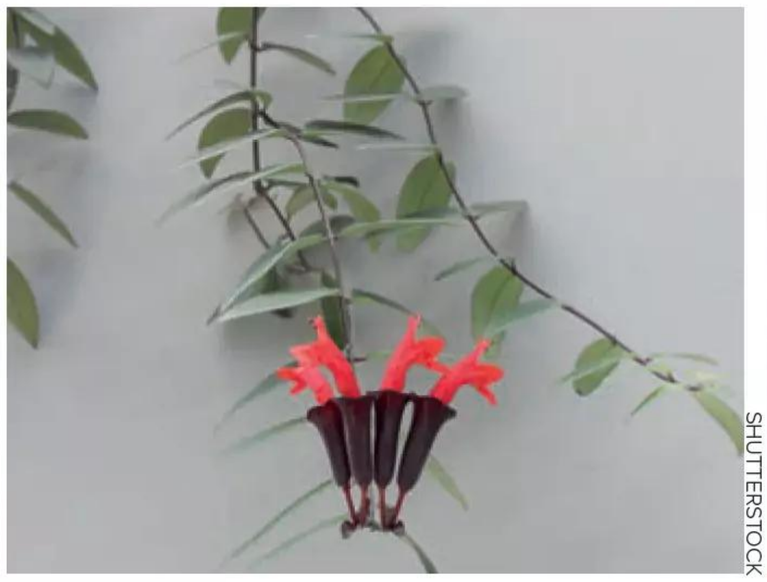
***Sansevieria trifasciata* (Snake plant)**
Adapts to various light conditions, even low light. Drought-tolerant; water sparingly. Excellent air purifier; ideal for bedrooms.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Epipremnum aureum* (Pothos)**
Grows well in low to bright indirect light. Allow soil to dry between waterings. Easy to propagate; great for hanging baskets or climbing.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Calathea zebrina* (Zebra plant)**
Likes bright, indirect light. Keep soil consistently moist; high humidity preferred. Leaves move throughout the day, following the sun.


SHUTTERSTOCK

***Aeschynanthus radicans* (Lipstick plant)** Prefers bright, indirect light; allow soil to dry slightly between waterings. Ideal for hanging baskets. Thrives in moderate to high humidity.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Pilea peperomioides* (Chinese money plant)** Enjoys bright, indirect light. Allow soil to dry between waterings. Produces numerous 'pups' for easy propagation.

AIR PURIFYING

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Chlorophytum bichetii* (St. Bernard's Lily)**
Thrives in moderate to bright indirect light. Does not produce 'babies' Removes formaldehyde and other indoor pollutants.

SHUTTERSTOCK

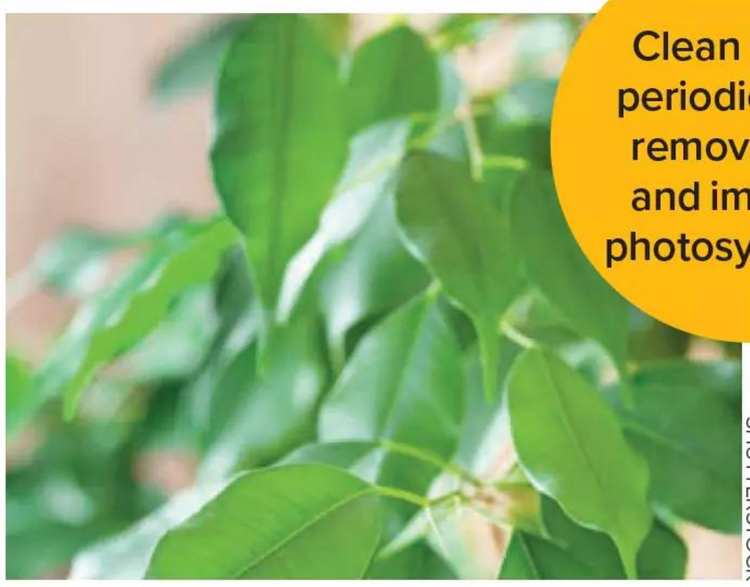
***Hedera helix* (English ivy)**
Adapts to various light conditions Allow soil to dry slightly between waterings. Effective at removing formaldehyde.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Syngonium podophyllum* (Arrowhead plant)**
Tolerates low to moderate light Keep soil consistently moist, but not waterlogged. Removes formaldehyde and other VOCs.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Dracaena fragrans* 'Compacta'**
Tolerates low to moderate light. Allow soil to dry between waterings. Filters out trichloroethylene.


SHUTTERSTOCK

Clean leaves periodically to remove dust and improve photosynthesis

***Ficus benjamina* (Weeping fig)**
Prefers bright, indirect light. Water when top inch of soil is dry. Removes formaldehyde and other VOCs.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Rhapis excelsa* (Lady palm)**
Adapts to low or bright indirect light. Keep soil consistently moist. Effective at removing ammonia.

SHUTTERSTOCK

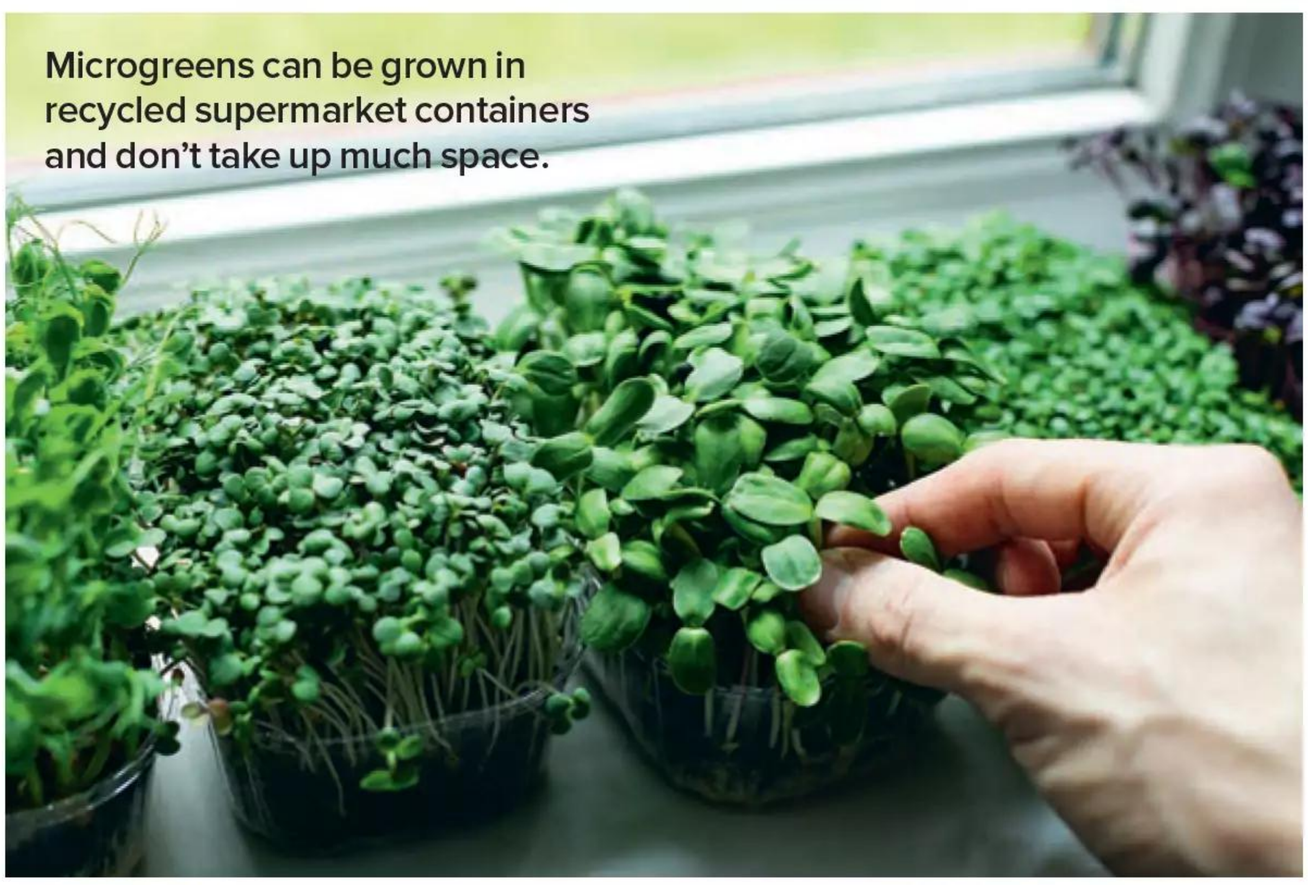
***Chamaedorea seifrizii* (Bamboo palm)**
Prefers bright, indirect light. Water when top inch of soil is dry. Removes formaldehyde and benzene.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Scindapsus pictus* 'Argyraeus'**
Tolerates low to moderate light. Allow soil to dry slightly between waterings. Removes formaldehyde and other indoor pollutants.

SHUTTERSTOCK

***Nephrolepis obliterata* (Kimberly queen fern)**
Prefers moderate to bright indirect light. Keep soil consistently moist. Filters out formaldehyde and other VOCs.



Microgreens can be grown in recycled supermarket containers and don't take up much space.

EDIBLES

Herbs

Basil, chives, mint, parsley, and cilantro are excellent choices for indoor herb gardens. Rosemary, thyme, and oregano can also thrive indoors with proper care. When buying herbs, consider choosing 'living herbs' from supermarkets – these are often multiple plants in one pot that can be separated and replanted for free extra plants!

Herbs generally need 6-8 hours of bright light daily. South-facing windows are ideal, but if natural light is limited, consider using grow lights. Use well-draining potting mix and ensure pots have drainage holes. Water when the top inch of soil feels dry, and feed with a diluted, balanced fertiliser every few weeks during the growing season. Most fertilisers used for edible plants are food-safe when used as directed. However, it's always a good practice to thoroughly rinse any fruits, vegetables, or herbs before eating them, regardless of whether they've been fertilised. This helps remove not just fertiliser residues, but also dust, potential pests, and other debris.

Microgreens

These nutrient-packed seedlings are perfect for small spaces. Popular choices include radish, mustard, kale, and pea shoots. Sow seeds densely in shallow trays filled with seed-starting mix. Keep the soil moist and provide bright light. Most microgreens are ready to harvest within 1-2 weeks of planting, when they've developed their first true leaves.

Lettuce and salad greens

Leafy greens like lettuce, spinach, and rocket grow well in shallow containers. Choose 'cut and come again' varieties for continuous harvests. These plants prefer cooler temperatures and can thrive under grow lights if natural light is limited. Harvest outer leaves regularly to encourage new growth.

Did you know? All indoor edibles benefit from good air circulation to prevent fungal issues. Rotate containers regularly for even growth, and keep an eye out for pests. With proper care, you can enjoy a variety of fresh, homegrown produce right from your windowsill or kitchen counter

Cherry tomatoes

For indoor tomatoes, choose compact or dwarf varieties like 'Tumbling Tom', 'Balconi Red', or 'Micro Tom'. They require at least 8 hours of bright light daily – a sunny south-facing window or grow lights are essential. Use a large pot (at least 12 inches deep) with good drainage. Support the plant with a small trellis or cage, and hand-pollinate flowers by gently shaking the plant or using a small brush.

Chilli peppers

Compact pepper varieties such as 'Apache', 'Medina', or 'Loco' are well-suited for indoor growing. They need warm temperatures (around 21°C/70°F) and bright light. Like tomatoes, peppers benefit from hand-pollination. Use well-draining soil and water consistently, allowing the top inch of soil to dry between waterings.

Top tips

Rotate pots regularly for even growth, and use well-draining potting mix. Remember to pollinate flowers manually with a small brush or by gently shaking the plants

Other indoor edibles

Scallions (spring onions)
Regrow scallions by placing the white root ends in a glass of water. Change the water every few days, and you'll have fresh growth in about a week.

Sprouts
Grow sprouts in a jar with a mesh lid. Popular choices include alfalfa, mung beans, and lentils. Rinse and drain twice daily until sprouts are ready, usually in 3-5 days.

Dwarf fruit trees
For larger spaces, consider dwarf citrus trees like Meyer lemon or key lime. These need very bright light and consistent care but can produce fruit indoors.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Indoor plants can fall victim to various pests and diseases, but with vigilance and prompt action, most issues can be resolved.

Common pests

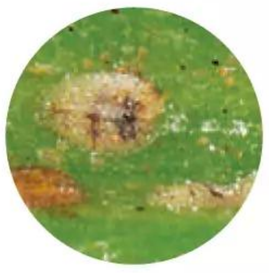
Aphids
These small, soft-bodied insects cluster on new growth and undersides of leaves.
Treatment: Wipe off with a damp cloth or spray with insecticidal soap.

GETTY

Spider mites
Tiny arachnids that cause stippling on leaves and fine webbing.
Treatment: Increase humidity, spray with water, or use neem oil.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Mealybugs
White, cottony insects that cluster in leaf axils and undersides.
Treatment: Remove with cotton swabs dipped in rubbing alcohol or use insecticidal soap.



Scale
Small, immobile insects that appear as bumps on stems and leaves.
Treatment: Scrape off gently or apply horticultural oil.

Fungus gnats
Small flies that hover around soil and plants.
Treatment: Allow soil to dry between waterings, use sticky traps, or apply nematodes to soil. Alternatively, a bottle top with almond oil or honey and water attracts them and they drown.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Thrips
Tiny insects that cause silvery patches on leaves.
Treatment: Use insecticidal soap or introduce predatory mites.

Common diseases

SHUTTERSTOCK

Root rot
Caused by overwatering and poor drainage.
Treatment: Improve drainage, repot in fresh soil, and reduce watering.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Powdery mildew
White, powdery coating on leaves.
Treatment: Improve air circulation, reduce humidity, and apply fungicide if severe.

Leaf spot
Brown or black spots on leaves caused by various fungi.
Treatment: Remove affected leaves, avoid wetting foliage, and use fungicide if necessary.

Botrytis (grey mould)
Fuzzy grey growth on leaves and flowers.
Treatment: Remove affected parts, improve air circulation, and reduce humidity.

Tips for success

1. Quarantine new plants for a few weeks before introducing them to your collection.
2. Regularly inspect plants for signs of pests or diseases.
3. Maintain proper watering practices to prevent fungal issues.
4. Ensure good air circulation around plants.
5. Clean leaves regularly to remove dust and spot potential problems early.
6. Use sterile potting mix and clean tools to prevent disease spread.
7. If using chemical treatments, always follow label instructions carefully.
8. Consider organic and biological controls when possible, such as beneficial insects.
9. Prune and dispose of heavily infested or diseased plant parts.
10. Maintain optimal growing conditions (light, temperature, humidity) to keep plants healthy and resistant to pests and diseases.

Don't forget...

Prevention is key. Healthy plants are more resistant to pests and diseases. Regular care, proper growing conditions, and swift action at the first sign of trouble will help keep your indoor garden thriving

Seasonal gardening

Gardening is a year-round activity, and each season brings its own set of tasks and opportunities. Understanding what to do throughout the year can help you maintain a healthy, productive garden and even extend your growing season.

SPRING

Spring is a time of renewal and preparation in the garden. As the weather warms up, it's time to:

1. **Clean up winter debris and prune dead or damaged branches:** Remove fallen leaves, twigs, and any plants that didn't survive the winter. Prune away dead or damaged branches from trees and shrubs to encourage healthy new growth.

2. **Test and amend soil:** Conduct a soil test to determine pH levels and nutrient content. Based on the results, amend your soil with compost, lime, or other additives as needed.

3. **Start seeds indoors:** Begin sowing seeds for summer crops like tomatoes, peppers, and annuals. This gives them a head start before outdoor planting.

4. **Plant cool-season vegetables and flowers:** Direct sow or transplant cool-season crops like peas, lettuce, and spinach. Plant spring-flowering bulbs and hardy annuals.

5. **Divide and transplant perennials:** Split overcrowded perennials and replant to rejuvenate them and fill in garden spaces.

6. **Prune spring-flowering shrubs:** After they've finished blooming, prune spring-flowering shrubs like forsythia and lilac to maintain their shape and encourage future flowers.

7. **Begin regular lawn maintenance:** Start mowing as grass begins active growth. Overseed bare patches and apply a spring fertiliser if needed.

8. **Set up supports for climbing plants:** Install trellises, stakes, or other supports for climbing vegetables and ornamental vines before they start growing.

Additional spring tasks

- **Clean and sharpen garden tools:** Ensure your tools are in good condition for the busy growing season ahead. Sharpen all edged tools such as shears, secateurs, spades, trowels and (most importantly) hoes, and then oil them, ready for use.
- **Start a compost bin:** If you don't already have one, spring is a great time to start composting garden and kitchen waste.
- **Plant herbs:** Many herbs can be started outdoors in spring, providing fresh flavours for your kitchen.
- **Monitor for pests:** As plants emerge, keep an eye out for early signs of pest problems and address them promptly.
- **Mulch beds:** Apply a layer of organic mulch around plants to suppress weeds and retain moisture as temperatures rise.

- **Begin hardening off seedlings:** Gradually expose indoor-started seedlings to outdoor conditions in preparation for transplanting.

Plan ahead for summer: Sketch out plans for summer plantings and any major garden projects you want to tackle this year

SUMMER

SHUTTERSTOCK

1. Plant warm-season vegetables and flowers: As the soil warms, plant heat-loving crops like tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, and squash. Sow seeds or plant seedlings of summer annuals for vibrant colour.

2. Maintain regular watering schedule: Water deeply and consistently, especially during dry spells. Water early in the morning to reduce evaporation and fungal growth. Consider installing a drip irrigation system for efficiency.

3. Mulch beds: Apply a 5-7 cm layer of organic mulch around plants to retain moisture, suppress weeds, and keep soil cool. Keep mulch away from plant stems to prevent rot.

4. Deadhead flowers: Remove spent blooms from annuals, perennials, and roses to encourage continuous flowering and prevent seed formation.

5. Harvest vegetables and herbs regularly: Pick produce at its peak for best flavour and to encourage continued production. Harvest herbs before they flower for best taste.

6. Monitor for pests and diseases: Regularly inspect plants for signs of trouble. Treat issues promptly, using organic methods where possible. Remove diseased foliage to prevent spread.

7. Prune summer-flowering shrubs: After blooming, prune summer-flowering shrubs like buddleia and lavender to maintain shape and promote bushier growth.

8. Continue lawn maintenance: Mow regularly, but raise the cutting height during hot periods to reduce stress on grass. Water deeply but infrequently to encourage deep root growth.

Summer is an ideal time to take softwood cuttings from many shrubs and perennials for propagation

Additional summer tasks

✿ **Stake tall plants:** Support tall or heavy plants like dahlias, sunflowers, and climbing vegetables to prevent damage from wind or fruit weight.

✿ **Feed:** Apply a balanced fertiliser to heavy feeders like tomatoes and container plants. Use a high-potassium feed for flowering and fruiting plants.

✿ **Manage your compost:** Turn your compost pile regularly and keep it moist to speed decomposition in the summer heat.

✿ **Keep on top of weeds:** Remove weeds before they set seed. Consider using ground cover plants or mulch in problem areas.

✿ **Care for your pond:** If you have a pond, remove algae regularly and top up water levels during dry spells. Prune and divide aquatic plants as needed.

✿ **Provide for wildlife:** Set up bird baths and keep them filled with fresh water. Plant pollinator-friendly flowers to support bees and butterflies.

SHUTTERSTOCK

✿ **Enjoy your garden:** Make time to relax and appreciate your hard work. Ask your friends and family over, or simply sit and enjoy the sights and sounds of your summer garden.

Plan ahead for autumn..
Order spring-flowering bulbs and consider what changes you might want to make to your garden in the cooler months

AUTUMN

Autumn is a crucial season in the garden, offering a chance to reflect on the past growing season and prepare for the next. Here's a guide to autumn gardening tasks:

1. Plant spring-flowering bulbs: September to November is ideal for planting tulips, daffodils, crocuses, and other spring bulbs. Plant at a depth of about three times the bulb's height.

2. Sow cover crops in vegetable beds: Plant green manures like clover or winter rye in empty beds to improve soil structure and fertility for the next season.

3. Clean up fallen leaves and compost healthy plant material: Rake leaves regularly to prevent lawn damage. Compost disease-free plant debris, but dispose of any diseased material.

4. Divide overcrowded perennials: Split and replant perennials like hostas, daylilies, and peonies to rejuvenate them and create new plants.

5. Harvest late-season crops: Gather the last of your summer vegetables and fruits. Harvest pumpkins and winter squash before the first frost.

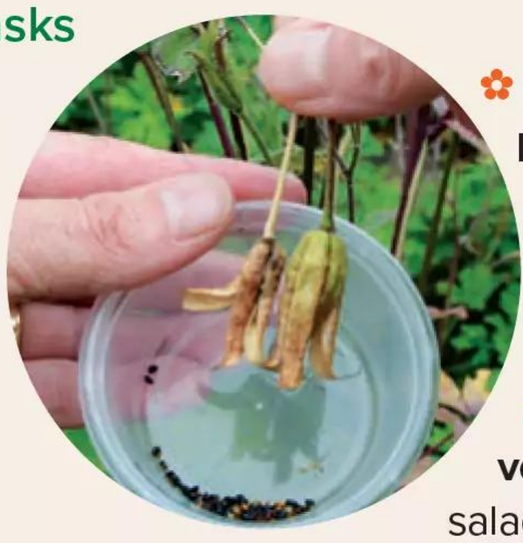
6 Prepare tender plants for winter: Move tender plants indoors or to a greenhouse. Wrap tree ferns and banana plants for frost protection.

7. Reduce watering as temperatures cool: Adjust your watering schedule as plants enter dormancy and rainfall increases.

GETTY

Autumn's cooler temperatures and increased rainfall make it an excellent time for planting woody plants, allowing roots to establish before winter

Additional autumn tasks



✿ **Collect seeds:** Gather seeds from favourite plants for next year's garden or to share with friends.

✿ **Clean and store garden tools:** Clean, sharpen, and oil tools before storing them for winter to prevent rust and ensure they're ready for spring.

✿ **Prune deciduous trees and shrubs:** Once leaves have fallen, prune to remove dead, diseased, or crossing branches. Avoid pruning spring-flowering shrubs at this time.

✿ **Aerate and feed lawns:** Core aerate compacted lawns and apply an autumn lawn fertiliser high in potassium to encourage strong root growth.

✿ **Start a new compost pile:** Use autumn leaves and spent plants to start a new compost heap, alternating 'green' and 'brown' materials.

✿ **Plant autumn vegetables:** Sow winter salads, spinach, and other cold-hardy crops for late autumn and winter harvests.

✿ **Net ponds:** Cover ponds with netting to prevent fallen leaves from decomposing in the water and affecting water quality.

✿ **Clean out bird houses and feeders:** Prepare for winter bird visitors by cleaning and restocking feeders and nest boxes.

✿ **Take hardwood cuttings:** Late autumn is ideal for taking hardwood cuttings from deciduous shrubs and trees.

SHUTTERSTOCK

✿ **Protect cold frames and greenhouses:** Clean glass to maximise light and check for damage. Insulate with bubble wrap if needed.

✿ **Plan for next year:** Reflect on this year's successes and challenges. Make notes and start planning for next spring's garden.

WINTER

1. Plan next year's garden: Use this quiet time to reflect on the past season and design your garden for the coming year. Research new plants and techniques you'd like to try.

2. Order seeds and plants: Browse catalogues and place orders early for the best selection. Consider joining seed-swapping groups for rare or heirloom varieties.

3. Prune dormant trees and shrubs: Focus on shaping deciduous trees and late-summer flowering shrubs. Avoid pruning spring-flowering shrubs at this time of year.

4. Clean and sharpen garden tools: Continue to thoroughly clean, oil, and sharpen your tools. Replace any that are beyond repair.

5. Protect vulnerable plants from frost: Use fleece, straw, or bubble wrap to insulate tender plants. Check protection regularly and ventilate on warmer days.

6. Check stored bulbs and tubers: Inspect dahlia tubers, begonia corms, and other stored bulbs for signs of rot or desiccation. Remove any that are damaged.

7. Keep paths clear of snow and ice: Regularly clear walkways to prevent accidents and maintain access to your garden. Use sand or grit instead of salt near plants.

Top tips

Keep an eye on crops like Brussels sprouts, kale, and winter salads. Provide additional protection during severe weather

Additional winter tasks

✿ **Feed the birds:** Provide food and fresh water for garden birds. Clean feeders regularly to prevent disease spread.

✿ **Harvest winter crops:** Continue to harvest winter vegetables like leeks, parsnips, and Brussels sprouts as needed.

✿ **Force rhubarb:** Cover rhubarb crowns with forcing pots or buckets for an early crop.

SHUTTERSTOCK

✿ **Maintain your compost:** Turn your compost heap to aerate it, even in cold weather.

✿ **Clean your greenhouse:** On a mild day, ventilate and thoroughly clean your greenhouse to prevent pests and diseases.

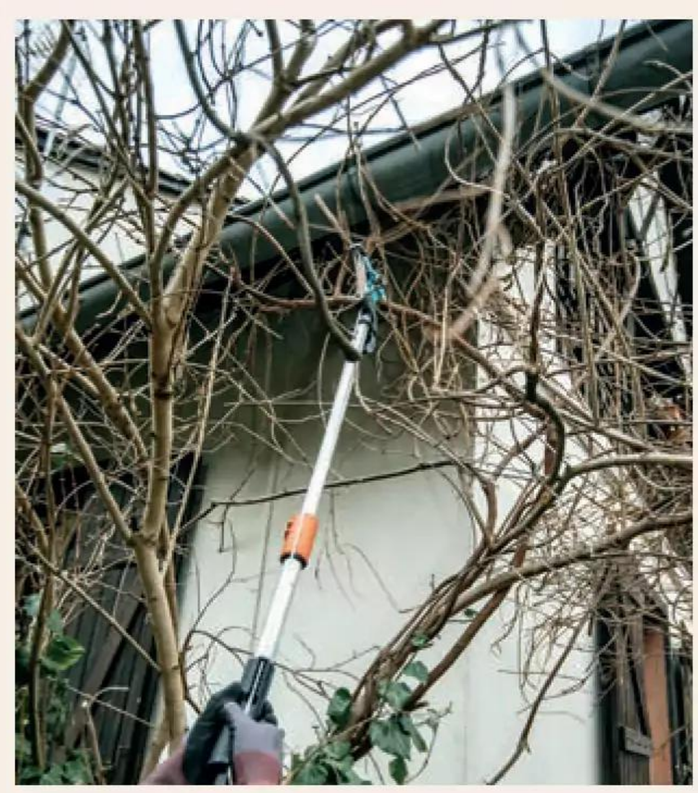
✿ **Start early seeds:** Towards the end of winter, start seeds indoors for early spring planting.

✿ **Repair and maintain structures:** Fix fences, trellises, and raised beds while the garden is dormant.

✿ **Monitor for pests:** Check for signs of rodent damage and take appropriate action if necessary.

✿ **Plant bare-root trees and shrubs:** If the ground isn't frozen, winter is an excellent time for planting bare-root plants.

✿ **Prune wisteria:** Late winter is the ideal time to prune wisteria to control its size and promote flowering.



Use cloches or cold frames to protect plants from frost

Extending the growing season

- Install a polytunnel or greenhouse for year-round growing
- Choose cold-hardy varieties of vegetables and flowers
- Use thermal mass (eg, water-filled containers) to store heat
- Plant in raised beds, which warm up faster in spring
- Use wall-side borders to create warm microclimates
- Implement succession planting for continuous harvests

Use row covers or fleece to insulate crops.

Tips for successful seasonal gardening

Keep a garden journal to track planting dates, successes, and challenges

Adjust your gardening schedule based on your local climate and microclimate

Use a soil thermometer to determine when soil is warm enough for planting

Practice crop rotation in vegetable gardens to maintain soil health

Stay on top of weeding throughout the growing season

Regularly check weather forecasts to anticipate and prepare for extreme conditions

Gradually acclimate plants when moving them between indoors and outdoors

Use vertical gardening techniques to maximise space and extend the season

Experiment with winter-sown seeds for early spring growth

Maintain good garden hygiene to prevent overwintering pests and diseases

Consider microclimate variations within your garden when planning and planting

Use companion planting to improve plant health and extend harvests

Properly store seeds, bulbs, and tubers during the off-season

Composting

Composting is an excellent way to recycle organic waste and create nutrient-rich soil for your garden. It's environmentally friendly, reduces landfill waste and improves soil health. Many county councils offer free or subsidised compost bins (and water butts), so do take a look at their website to see if yours does.

A compost bin is a world in microcosm. Your garden and kitchen waste provides shelter and food for a complex web of tens of billions of creatures. At its centre are microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi, helped along by mites, springtails and earthworms, which chew, tear and suck your garden waste into tiny pieces. In turn, these are eaten by creatures such as beetles, slowworms, lizards, toads and birds.

Benefits of composting

1. Soil improvement
Adds nutrients and beneficial microorganisms to soil. Improves soil structure and water retention. Enhances plant growth and health.

2. Waste reduction
Diverts organic waste from landfills. Reduces methane emissions from decomposing organic matter in landfills.

3. Cost savings
Reduces the need for chemical fertilisers. Lowers waste disposal costs.

4. Environmental benefits
Promotes sustainable gardening practices. Reduces carbon footprint.

5. Educational value
Learn about natural cycles and decomposition. Encourages eco-friendly habits.

Setting up your compost bin

Choose a location
Select a level, well-drained area and ensure there's easy access and room for adding materials and harvesting compost. Place in partial shade to maintain moisture.

Select a bin type
Enclosed bins: Good for small spaces, deter pests
Open bins: Allow easier access, good for larger volumes
Tumbling bins: Easy to turn, speed up decomposition
Worm bins (vermicomposting): Ideal for indoor composting
Dalek bins: Compact units suitable for most gardens' needs

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Prepare the base
Place the bin directly on soil to allow worms and microorganisms to enter. If using a hard surface, add a layer of soil at the bottom.

Layer materials
Start with a layer of brown materials (carbon-rich). Alternate with green materials (nitrogen-rich). Aim for a ratio of about 3 parts brown to 1 part green.

Your heap doesn't need to heat up to compost effectively – but you do need to be more patient with a cold composting system. A medium-sized compost heap can reach 55°C at its centre within a few days. The heat helps to speed up the decomposition process so you can make compost more quickly, and it helps to kill weeds and diseases. If your compost doesn't heat up, it can be just as nutritious, but it will take longer to be ready for use.

DIY COMPOST HEAP

Materials
- 3 wooden pallets (ideally of the same size)
- 16-20 fencing staples or strong wire
- Hammer
- Wire cutters
- Safety gloves and goggles

Method:

✿ Choose a location
- Select a level area in your garden
- Ensure it's easily accessible

✿ **Prepare the pallets**
- Clean the pallets if necessary
- Remove any loose nails or splinters for safety

✿ **Build the back wall**
- Stand one pallet upright where you want the back of your compost bin to be
- Secure it in place by driving stakes into the ground on either side, or by partially burying the bottom edge

✿ **Add the side walls**
- Stand two more pallets upright to form the sides
- Attach these to the base and back pallet using staples or wire
- Make sure the corners are securely fastened

✿ **Create a removable front (optional)**
- A fourth pallet can be used as a removable front
- Attach two hooks on each side wall
- The front pallet can then be slid in and out of these hooks for easy access

✿ **Add a cover (optional)**
- To keep your compost from getting too wet or dry, consider adding a cover
- This could be a piece of old carpet, plywood, or a tarp

✿ **Safety considerations**
- Wear gloves to protect your hands from splinters
- Use safety goggles when hammering or cutting wire
- Ensure the structure is stable before using it

- Cover raw food scraps with brown materials to deter pests
- Use some grass clippings in your compost, but also consider using them as mulch
- Use banana skins to add potassium to your compost

UNDERSTANDING GREEN AND BROWN MATERIALS

For successful composting, you need a mix of two types of materials: 'green' and 'brown'. These aren't necessarily related to their actual colours, but rather to their composition and role in the composting process.

Green materials
These are rich in nitrogen. They tend to be moist and break down quickly. They provide food for the microorganisms that decompose the compost.

Examples of green materials include:
- Fresh grass clippings
- Fruit and vegetable scraps (raw)
- Coffee grounds and tea bags
- Fresh plant trimmings
- Eggshells (though these decompose slowly)
- Banana skins (high in potassium)

Brown materials
These are rich in carbon. They tend to be dry and break down more slowly. They provide bulk and allow air to circulate in the compost pile.

Examples of brown materials include:
- Dry leaves
- Straw or hay
- Shredded paper or cardboard
- Wood chips or sawdust
- Dry plant stalks
- Dried grass clippings

Materials to avoid
- Meat, fish, and dairy products (attract pests)
- Diseased plants or plant material. (if in doubt, don't add it)
- Persistent weeds (eg, bindweed)
- Dog or cat faeces
- Glossy or coloured paper
- Coal ash
- Treated wood products

Remember...
Composting is a forgiving process. With practice, you'll soon get a feel for the right balance of materials

Why the mix matters

Composting organisms need both carbon and nitrogen to thrive. The green materials provide nitrogen for protein synthesis, while the brown materials provide carbon for energy.

Aim for a ratio of about 3 parts brown to 1 part green. This doesn't have to be exact, but it's a good guideline. Layer your materials, alternating between green and brown. If your compost is too wet or smelly, add more brown materials. If it's too dry or decomposing slowly, add more green materials.

Maintaining your compost

1. Moisture
- Keep the pile as moist as a wrung-out sponge
- Cover the bin to control moisture in rainy weather
- In dry conditions, water the pile to maintain moisture

2. Aeration
- Turn or mix the pile every few weeks to introduce oxygen
- This speeds up decomposition and prevents odours

3. Temperature:
- Use a compost thermometer to monitor temperature (55-65°C is ideal for hot composting)
- Cold composting (around 30°C) is fine for beginners and will produce compost in about six months

4. Balance:
- Maintain a good mix of green and brown materials
- Adjust the ratio based on the pile's condition
- A well-balanced pile should have an 'earthy' smell

Pruning

Proper pruning is essential for keeping your garden healthy, tidy, and productive. For beginners, these tasks might seem daunting, but with a bit of knowledge and practice, you'll soon be nurturing your garden like a pro.

Pruning plays a vital role in maintaining plant health. By removing dead, diseased, or damaged parts of the plant, you prevent the spread of diseases and improve the overall health of your garden. Taking a proactive approach can save you time and effort in the long run, as it's much easier to prevent problems than to cure them once they've become established.

Shape and size control is another key benefit of regular pruning. As plants grow, they can often become unruly or outgrow their intended space. Through careful pruning, you can maintain the size and shape of your plants that you want. This is particularly important in smaller gardens or for plants growing near structures like fences or buildings.

Improved air circulation is a less obvious but equally important reason to prune. By thinning out dense growth, you allow better airflow through the plant. This reduces humidity around the leaves and stems, which in turn lowers the risk of fungal diseases that thrive in damp, stagnant conditions. Your plants will thank you for this extra bit of care!

Light penetration goes hand in hand with air circulation. Proper pruning ensures that light can reach all parts of the plant, not just the outermost leaves. This promotes better growth and encourages fuller, healthier foliage and more abundant flowering. For plants grown for their flowers or fruit, this can make a significant difference in their overall performance.

Strategic pruning can also stimulate new growth, leading to a fuller, bushier plant. This is particularly useful for hedges, topiary, and plants that you want to keep compact and dense. By cutting back stems, you encourage the plant to produce new shoots, resulting in a more lush and vibrant appearance.

For fruit trees and some flowering plants, pruning can significantly increase yield. By removing excess growth, the plant's energy is directed into producing fruit or flowers rather than maintaining unnecessary leaf growth. This can result in larger, higher-quality fruits and more prolific flowering.

Last, but not least, pruning is important for safety, especially with larger trees. Removing dead or weak branches prevents potential hazards, such as falling boughs during storms. This is particularly important near buildings and walkways.

It's important to approach pruning with knowledge and care. Different plants have different pruning requirements, and timing can be crucial. You'll soon develop an eye for what needs to be pruned and when. Start small and gradually build your skills.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Basic pruning techniques

✿ Clean cuts

Always use sharp, clean tools to make smooth cuts. Cut at a 45-degree angle just above a bud or leaf node. This promotes quick healing and reduces the risk of disease. Clean your tools with a diluted bleach solution or rubbing alcohol between plants to prevent spreading diseases.

✿ The 'Three Ds' – Dead, Diseased, or Damaged growth

Remove any dead, diseased, or damaged parts of the plant. Cut back to

healthy tissue, which is usually green and firm.

Make your cut just above a healthy bud or where the branch meets a larger stem. Dispose of diseased material away from the garden to prevent spread, burning it if possible, or bagging it for council collection – don't compost it.

✿ Thinning

Remove entire branches or stems to improve air circulation and light penetration. This is particularly important for fruit trees and dense shrubs.

Cut back to the main stem or to a lateral branch. Aim to remove about 10-20% of the growth, focusing on crossing or rubbing branches

Step back regularly to assess the overall shape of the plant. For fruit trees, create an open goblet shape that lets plenty of light and air through to the flowers and fruit.

✿ Heading back

Shortening branches to encourage bushier growth. Cut just above an outward-facing bud to direct new growth away from the centre of the plant. This technique is useful for creating denser, more compact plants. Avoid cutting more than one-third of the plant's growth in a single season.

✿ Rejuvenation pruning

For overgrown shrubs, cutting them back hard can stimulate new growth. Typically done in late winter or early spring. Only suitable for certain plants, so do check before attempting this. Cut the entire plant back to about 15-30 cm from the ground. Be patient – it may take a full growing season to see the benefits.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF PRUNING

1. Maintenance pruning
Regular removal of dead, diseased, or damaged growth • Suitable for most plants • Can be done throughout the year as needed

Torn or damaged branches need pruning to prevent disease entry.
SHUTTERSTOCK

2. Formative pruning
Shaping young trees and shrubs to develop a strong structure • Typically done in the first few years • Aims to create a well-balanced framework for future growth

3. Thinning
Removing selected branches to reduce density • Improves light penetration and air circulation • Particularly important for fruit trees and dense shrubs

4. Heading back – also known as tip pruning
Cutting back the tips of branches to encourage bushier growth • Often used on hedges and to control the size of shrubs • Stimulates growth of lateral buds (side buds)

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5. Rejuvenation
Severe cutting back of overgrown shrubs • Encourages new growth from the base of the plant • Typically done in late winter or early spring

6. Deadheading
Removing spent flowers before they set seed • Encourages further blooming in many plants • Can be done throughout the flowering season

7. Timing
Prune deciduous trees and shrubs in late winter before they come into leaf. Leave early-flowerers like forsythia and shrubs (eg, weigela and philadelphus) until after they've flowered. Prune plum, gage, and cherry trees in summer when they're less vulnerable to silver leaf disease.

8. Root pruning
Trimming roots to control plant size or prepare for transplanting • More advanced technique, not typically needed for beginners

9. Pinching out
Removing the growing tips of plants to encourage bushier growth • Often done with fingers on soft new growth • Useful for herbs and young plants

10. Espalier pruning
Training trees or shrubs to grow flat against a wall • Requires ongoing pruning to maintain the shape

For beginners, the most important methods to learn are maintenance pruning, deadheading, and basic thinning. As you gain confidence, you can explore more advanced techniques like rejuvenation pruning or espalier. Always research the specific needs of your plants, as pruning requirements can vary greatly between species

SPECIFIC PLANT PRUNING AND DEADHEADING

Roses

- Remove weak, damaged, and dead wood
- Cut to an outward-facing bud to create an open, attractive shape
- For climbing roses, remove old stems to make room for new growth and prune flowering shoots by two-thirds
- Deadhead regularly throughout the flowering season by cutting back to the first set of leaves

Clematis

Group 1 (early bloomers): Only tidy up with shears after flowering
Group 2 (early summer bloomers): Reduce weak stems to a healthy pair of leaf buds in late winter
Group 3 (late summer bloomers): Cut back established stems to just above a low, healthy bud in late winter

Deadhead Group 2 and 3 types after first flush of flowers to encourage a second bloom

Soft fruits

- Prune summer-fruiting raspberries by cutting out all canes that have fruited, leaving the new canes for next year's crop
- For blackcurrants, remove old, weak, and unproductive stems from low down to encourage strong new shoots
- For gooseberries, thin the centre and remove low branches to create a goblet shape, for air circulation

Cut back shrub rose stems by a third in late winter to protect from storms.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Lavender

- Prune after flowering in late summer, using shears
- Cut back by about one-third, avoiding cutting into old wood
- Shape into a mound, leaving some new growth
- Deadheading isn't necessary but can improve appearance

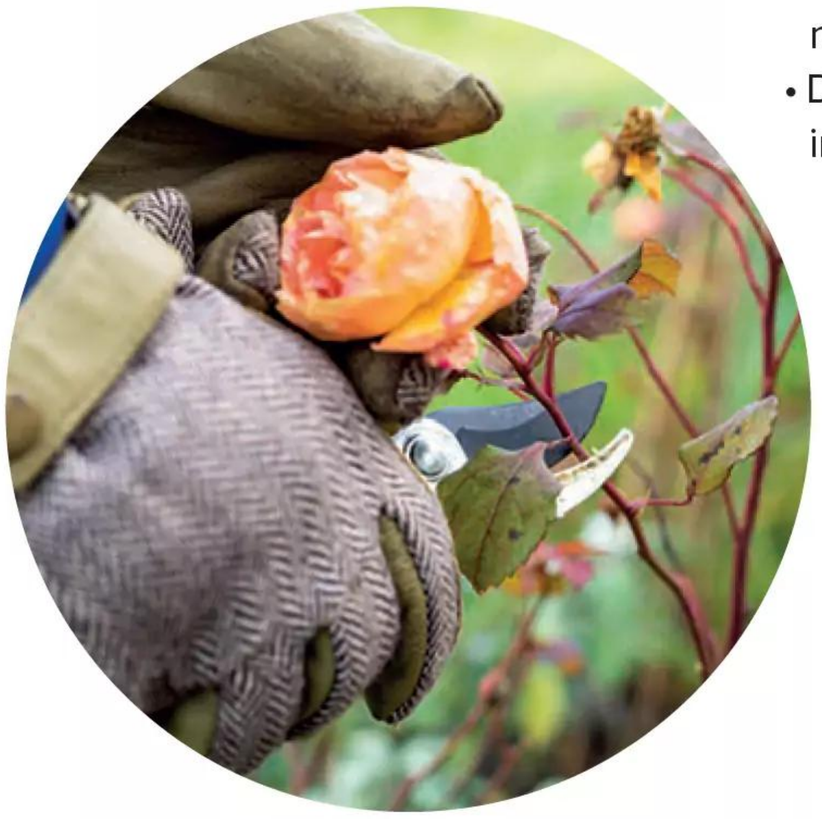
Hydrangeas

- For mophead and lacecap types, cut back flowered stems to a strong pair of buds in spring
- For paniculata types, cut back to a framework in early spring
- Remove dead and crossing branches
- Deadhead by cutting back the faded flowerheads to the first set of healthy buds in spring

Wisteria

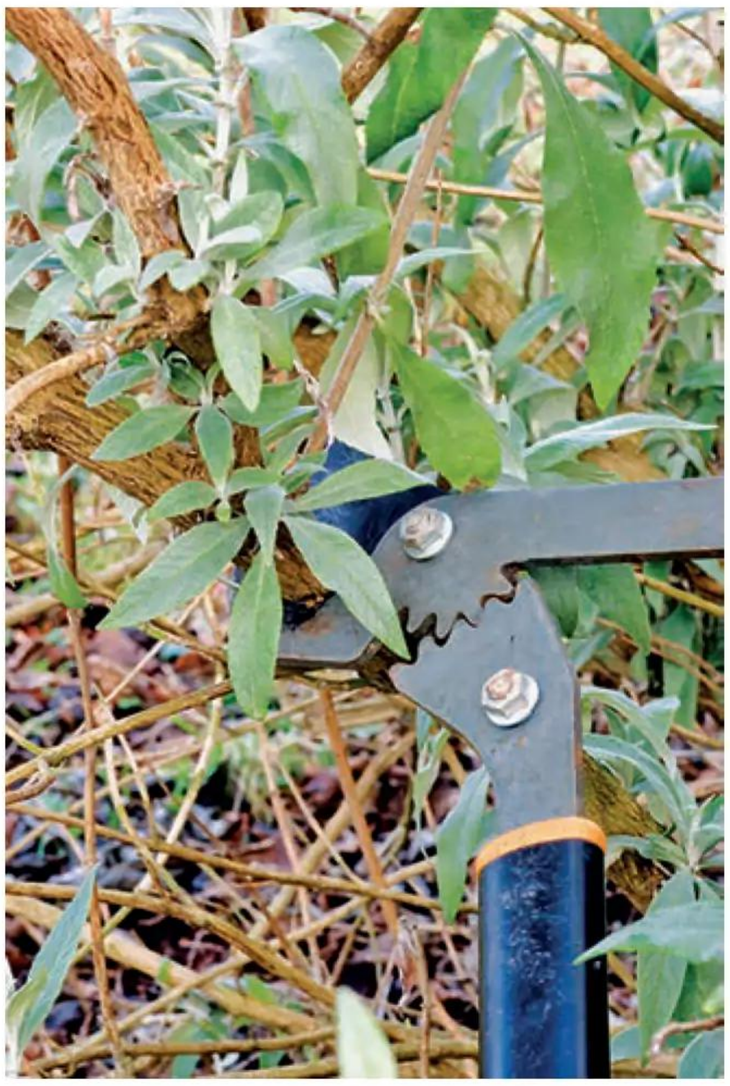
Prune twice a year: in summer after flowering and in winter

- In winter, cut these same shoots back to two or three buds
- Deadheading isn't typically necessary



Don't forget...

Deadheading not only keeps plants looking tidy but also often encourages more flowers. However, if you want to collect seeds or provide food for birds, leave some seedheads intact, especially towards the end of the season



Buddleja
- Cut back to a framework about 60cm (2ft) high
- Remove dead, weak, and crossing stems
- Deadhead throughout summer to prolong flowering

Forsythia
- Prune immediately after flowering
- Cut back flowered shoots to strong young growth
- Remove about a quarter of old stems at the base annually

Fuchsias
- For hardy types, prune in spring as new growth begins
- Cut back to just above a low pair of buds
- Remove any dead or damaged stems
- Deadhead regularly to encourage continuous blooming

Philadelphus (Mock Orange)
- Prune after flowering in summer
- Cut back flowered stems to strong young growth
- Remove a few old stems at the base to encourage new growth

Dahlias
- Cut the stem back to a pair of leaves
- In autumn, cut back all growth to about 15cm (6in) after the first frost

SHUTTERSTOCK

Deadhead dahlias regularly to encourage more blooms.

Damaged, diseased wood needs to be removed.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Different plants have different pruning and maintenance requirements. When in doubt, it's always best to research the specific needs of your plants

Perennials (eg, Delphiniums, lupins)
- Deadhead regularly to prolong flowering. Cut back flower stalks to ground level after flowering has finished
- Some perennials may produce a second flush of flowers if cut back after the first flowering

Apple and pear trees
- Prune in winter when dormant
- Remove dead, diseased, or crossing branches
- Thin out to improve air circulation
- For espaliers, prune in summer to maintain shape

Rhododendrons and azaleas
- Generally need minimal pruning
- Remove dead, damaged, or diseased branches after flowering
- For overgrown plants, cut back hard just after flowering

SHUTTERSTOCK

Deadhead rhododendrons and azaleas by snapping off faded blooms, taking care not to damage new growth buds.

Sustainable gardening

Sustainable gardening focuses on creating and maintaining gardens in ways that are environmentally responsible and resource-efficient. This not only benefits the environment but also creates healthier, more resilient gardens. Key aspects of sustainable gardening include water conservation, supporting pollinators, and reducing chemical use.

Sustainable gardening focuses on working with nature rather than against it. While it may take some adjustment, the rewards of a healthy, vibrant, and eco-friendly garden are well worth the effort.

Water-wise gardening

1. Choose drought-tolerant plants
- Select native plants adapted to your local climate
- Group plants with similar water needs together (hydrozoning)

2. Improve soil structure
- Add organic matter to improve water retention
- Use mulch to reduce evaporation and suppress weeds

3. Efficient irrigation
- Install drip irrigation or soaker hoses
- Water deeply but less frequently to encourage deep root growth
- Water early in the morning or late in the evening to reduce evaporation

4. Collect rainwater
- Use water butts to harvest rainwater
- Direct downspout overflows to garden beds or create a series of butts

5. Reduce lawn area
- Replace grass with drought-tolerant groundcovers or native plants
- Consider alternatives like gravel or permeable paving for some areas

SHUTTERSTOCK

Top tip

Embrace sustainable practices from the start. Use rainwater collection, choose native plants, and opt for natural pest control methods

DROUGHT-TOLERANT PLANTS

Stachys byzantina
Lamb's ear can grow in dry soil and is attractive at the front of a border. Good for groundcover, ideal for filling gaps between flowering plants. It has spikes of pink to purple flowers in summer. **Flowers:** Jun to Aug. **H&S:** 50cm (1½ft).

***Verbena bonariensis* AGM**
Adds height to a border without blocking other plants. Long flowering season, attracting pollinators. After flowering it will self seed, giving you more plants for free. **Flowers:** Jul to Sep. **HxS:** 1.5mx50cm (5x1½ft).

Euphorbia x martini
Add this to a sunny border or gravel garden. Its greeny-yellow flowers with red centres are eye-catching but it looks good year round with evergreen foliage. Good for a small garden. **Flowers:** Mar to Jul. **H&S:**(75cm (2½ft).

***Eryngium* 'Silver Ghost'**
Sea hollies add something different with their spiky flowerheads and vibrant shades, from steely-blue to silvery grey-green. Eryngiums will grow well in dry soil in full sun. **Flowers:** Jul to Sep. **HxS:** 60x45cm (24x18in).

***Hylotelephium* 'Herbstfreude'**
(syn. Sedum 'Autumn Joy') AGM
Flat flowerheads that attract bees and other pollinators, gradually turning a pale-pink that darkens as the flowers mature. **Flowers:** Aug to Sep. **H&S:** 60cm (2ft).

***Verbascum* 'Cotswold Queen'**
Tall spires of flowers and will thrive on poor, dry soil. The flowers come in shades from yellow like 'Cotswold Queen' through to orange, pink and purple. **Flowers:** Jul to Aug. **HxS:** 1.2mx30cm (4x1ft).

***Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' AGM**
Spires of blue/purple flowers good for a sunny border. It's a tough, reliable plant. Other good varieties are 'Six Hills Giant' and the compact 'Little Titch'. **Flowers:** Jun to Aug. **HxS:** 75x50cm (2½x1½ft).

***Echinops ritro* 'Veitch's Blue'**
Echinops will need time to establish, but it's a good choice. It has a globe, thistle-like flower and good for cutting. Water well while the plants are young and plant in full sun. **Flowers:** Jul to Sep. **HxS:** 90x60cm (3x2ft).

***Geranium sanguineum var. striatum* AGM**
Hardy geraniums are able to cope with a bit of drought. This variety needs time to establish but should be drought tolerant once it's mature. **Flowers:** Jun to Aug. **HxS:** 15x30cm (6x12in).

Attracting pollinators and beneficial insects

Attracting beneficial insects to your garden is a great way to start gardening more sustainably. These tiny creatures play a crucial role in plant reproduction, helping to produce better harvests of fruits and vegetables, and more abundant flowers. Beyond pollination, many insects act as natural pest controllers, reducing the need for chemical interventions and creating a more balanced garden ecosystem.

1. Plant for pollinators
- Choose native flowering plants that bloom at different times
- Include a variety of flower shapes and sizes to attract diverse pollinators

2. Create habitat
- Leave some areas of the garden 'wild'
- Provide water sources like shallow dishes or bird baths
- Install insect hotels or bee houses

3. Avoid pesticides
- Pesticides can harm beneficial insects along with pests
- Use alternative pest control methods where possible

4. Plant host plants
- Include plants that support butterfly and moth larvae
- Native trees and shrubs often serve as important host plants

5. Provide year-round resources
- Include plants that offer food or shelter in different seasons
- Leave seedheads and dead stems standing over winter

Top tips

✿ Aim to provide sustenance for as much of the year as possible. Let ivy mature to provide a valuable source of winter nectar.

✿ Find space for larval food plants such as nettles for red admiral, comma, painted lady and small tortoiseshells. Goat willow *Salix caprea* is also a food plant for several moth caterpillar varieties and its flowers an early source of nectar.

✿ Provide spaces for hibernation, such as insect hotels. Keep them clean and position them in full sun facing south or south east, ideally a metre off the ground.

✿ Allow areas of grass to grow longer for bees to nest and overwinter, and grow clover and self-heal. Look for tiny holes surrounded by small piles of soil, the tell-tale sign of a solitary bees.

✿ Provide shady spots for butterflies during extreme heat and put out shallow trays of water and pebbles to provide a safe drinking place. Hoverflies lay their eggs near water or boggy places, so even a bowl of pebbles, water and some plants provides an inviting prospect.

✿ Avoid using pesticides and herbicides.

Going peat-free

The UK government's voluntary target to end the sale of peat for amateur gardeners by 2024 has seen mixed results. While there has been significant progress, the goal hasn't been fully achieved.

Many major retailers and garden centres have increased their range of peat-free products, and several leading brands have completely phased out peat from their composts for amateur gardeners. However, some peat-based products are still available on the market.

The government is considering stronger measures, including a potential ban on the sale of peat compost to home gardeners.

There's been a noticeable shift in consumer awareness and demand for peat-free alternatives, and the quality of peat-free composts has improved significantly, addressing earlier concerns about their performance.

How you can help

- Choose peat-free compost
- Look for composts made from materials like coir, wood fibre, or green waste

- Many garden centres and DIY stores now offer a range of peat-free options
- Create your own peat-free growing medium using kitchen and garden waste. This not only saves money but also reduces waste
- Adapt your gardening practices
- Peat-free composts may require different watering and feeding regimes
- Be prepared to adjust your gardening habits accordingly
- Support peatland conservation
- Understand that peatlands are crucial carbon sinks and wildlife habitats
- By going peat-free, you're helping to preserve these vital ecosystems

INSECT FRIENDLY PLANTS

Cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*)
Produces numerous flowers in various colours. Ideal for cutting gardens, borders, or pots. Provides ample nectar for pollinators. **Flowers:** June to Sept. **HxS:** 75x30cm (2½x1ft)

Scabious
Pin cushion-like heads attract pollinators. Choose from annual, biennial Scabiosa or perennial Knautia and Cephalaria. Available in white, burgundy, mauve, and pink. **Flowers:** June to August. **HxS:** 60x30cm (2x1ft)

Calendula (Pot marigold)
Cheerful, daisy-like annual with edible petals. Grows well in beds, borders, or pots. Available in shades of yellow, orange, pink, and cream. **Flowers:** May to Oct. **HxS:** 50x30cm (20x12in)

Cosmos
Daisy-like blooms in a range of colours from white to rich pinks, reds and oranges. Feathery foliage adds texture. Great for sunny borders and cutting gardens.**Flowers:** May to Oct. **HxS:** 90x45cm 93x1½ft)

Night-scented stock (*Matthiola longipetala*)
Fragrant white, pink or lilac flowers that release their scent in the evening, attracting night-flying moths. Ideal for near seating areas. **Flowers:** June to August. **HxS:** 53x30cm (21x12in)

***Limnanthes douglasii* (Poached egg plant)**
Low-growing annual with yellow and white flowers that attract hoverflies. Often self-seeds and is useful in kitchen gardens for pest control. **Flowers:** June to Sept. **HxS:** 15x30cm (6x12in)

***Echium vulgare* (Viper's bugloss)**
Tall spikes of vibrant blue flowers loved by bees. A biennial that self-seeds readily. Thrives in poor, well-drained soil. **Flowers:** June to Sept. **HxS:** 90x30cm (3x1ft)

***Echinacea purpurea* (Coneflower)**
Sturdy perennial with large, daisy-like flowers. Attractive to butterflies and bees, with seedheads providing food for birds in autumn. **Flowers:** July to Sept. **HxS:** 90x45cm (3x1½ft)

***Helenium* (Sneezeweed)**
Cheerful flowers in warm shades of yellow, orange, and red. Excellent late-season colour. Attracts butterflies and bees. Great for prairie-style plantings and mixed borders. **Flowers:** August to October. **HxS:** 90x45cm (3x1½ft)

Pests and diseases

Common challenges for new gardeners

Whetever the size of your garden, at some point you'll have to deal with pests of one sort or another. Diseases are less common, but are still a potential issue.

While a certain level of pest activity is natural – and even beneficial – in a balanced ecosystem, excessive damage can compromise plant health and the look of your garden. Understanding how to identify and manage common issues using a range of methods, preferably starting with the most environmentally friendly options, is key to successful gardening.

Identifying common pests

Aphids
Small, soft-bodied insects that cluster on new growth and undersides of leaves. Can be grey, green, or black in colour. They reproduce rapidly, often causing distorted growth and sticky residue (honeydew) on leaves. Aphids can transmit plant viruses and attract ants, which protect them from predators.

Control methods
- Squash by hand or wash off with a strong jet of water
- Encourage natural predators like ladybirds and lacewings
- Use insecticidal soap or neem oil for heavy infestations
- Prune heavily infested parts of plants
- Typically 1-3mm long

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Slugs and snails
Soft-bodied molluscs active mostly at night and in damp conditions, leaving distinctive slime trails. They can cause significant damage to plants, especially seedlings and tender, low-growing vegetation.

Signs
- Irregular holes in leaves, often with smooth edges
- Damage concentrated on low-growing plants
- Slime trails on plants, soil, and hard surfaces
- Seedlings disappear overnight

Control methods
- Remove by hand at night
- Barriers like copper tape or eggshells
- Beer traps or organic commercial slug pellets
- Encourage natural predators like hedgehogs and frogs

Caterpillars
Larvae of various moth and butterfly species. Caterpillars can cause significant damage to plants in gardens and vegetable patches.

Signs
- Holes in leaves, often large and irregular
- Droppings (frass) visible on leaves or ground beneath plants
- Presence of caterpillars on plants, sometimes in groups
- Rolled or webbed leaves where some species hide

Control methods
- Hand-picking and removing
- Encourage natural predators; birds, wasps and ground beetles
- Biological controls like *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt)
- Covering vulnerable crops with netting or fleece

Whitefly
Tiny white flying insects that congregate on the undersides of leaves. Can be particularly problematic in greenhouses.

Signs
- Large numbers of small, white, winged insects on leaf undersides
- Yellowing leaves, often starting with older, lower leaves
- Sticky residue (honeydew) on leaves, similar to aphid infestations
- Sooty mould may develop on the honeydew, turning it black

Control methods
- Regular inspection
- Use of yellow sticky traps to monitor and reduce populations
- Spray plants with insecticidal soap or neem oil
- Remove severely infested plants to prevent spread

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Red spider mites
Tiny arachnids, often hard to see with the naked eye. They can be various colours including red, green, or brown. They thrive in hot, dry conditions and can reproduce rapidly, causing significant damage.

Signs
- Fine webbing, particularly between leaves and stems
- Mottled or stippled leaves, often with a silvery or bronzed appearance
- Leaves may turn yellow, dry out, and fall off in severe cases
- Tiny moving dots visible on leaf undersides when inspected

Control methods
- Increase humidity around plants
- Regularly mist leaves
- Use insecticidal soaps or horticultural oils

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Vine weevils
Adult beetles eat plant leaves, while their larvae (grubs) target roots, causing significant damage to the plant's health

Signs
- Notched edges on leaves, indicating feeding by adult beetles
- Plants suddenly wilting or dying, often due to extensive root damage caused by larvae
- Grubs may be found in the soil, especially around roots, typically white with a brown head

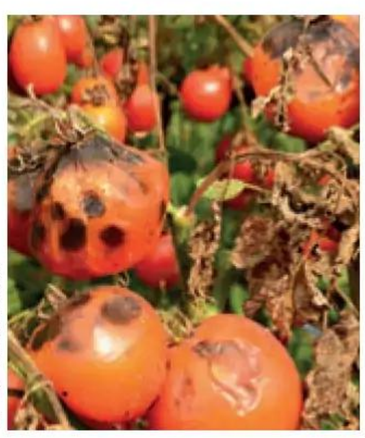
Control methods
- Hand-pick adult beetles at night
- Apply nematodes (like *Steinernema kraussei*) to soil to target larvae

Identifying common diseases

Powdery mildew
A common fungal disease that manifests as a white, powdery coating on plant leaves, stems, and sometimes fruit. It thrives in warm, dry conditions but also needs some humidity for spores to germinate.

Signs
- White, powder-like patches
- Distorted or stunted growth
- In severe cases, leaves may yellow, dry out, and fall off prematurely
- Plants may show signs of stress or reduced vigour

Control methods
- Improve air circulation
- Avoid overhead watering
- Apply fungicides, such as sulfur or neem oil, at early signs of infection
- Remove and dispose of severely infected plant parts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Blight
A fungal disease that primarily affects potatoes and tomatoes, capable of rapidly spreading and causing significant damage to crops. There are two main types: early and late, with late blight being more devastating.

Signs
- Brown or black spots on leaves, stems, or fruits
- Stems may blacken and collapse, and fruits may rot

Control methods
- Remove and destroy affected plant material to prevent spread
- Avoid overhead watering, as moisture on leaves encourages fungal growth
- Use fungicides containing copper or chlorothalonil
- Space plants properly to promote good air circulation

Rust
A fungal disease that appears as orange, brown, or yellow pustules on leaves, stems, or flowers. It can affect a wide variety of plants and typically spreads in warm, moist conditions.

Signs
- Orange or brown pustules
- Leaves may yellow and fall
- Infected areas may become dry and cracked
- Plants may experience reduced vigour, stunted growth, or dieback if not controlled

Control methods
- Remove and destroy infected leaves to prevent further spread
- Water plants at the base to avoid wetting the foliage
- Improve air circulation by spacing and pruning
- Sulphur-based fungicides

Prevention is key in managing pests and diseases. Start with healthy soil, choose resistant plant varieties, and practice good garden hygiene. Regularly inspect your plants for signs of trouble, removing affected parts promptly

Club root
A fungal disease primarily affecting brassicas (plants in the cabbage family, including some flowers), and targets plant roots, causing significant damage and reducing growth.

Signs
- Stunted plant growth
- Wilting, especially on hot days,
- Swollen, distorted, or 'clubbed' roots that look lumpy or gnarled
- Plants may be more susceptible to other diseases or stress factors

Control methods
- Avoid brassicas in the same soil for several years
- Raise soil pH by adding lime,
- Remove and destroy infected plants to prevent spreading
- Improve soil drainage, as the fungus prefers wet conditions

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Damping off
A fungal disease that affects seedlings, often occurring in overly moist and poorly ventilated conditions. It can quickly wipe out young plants before they have a chance to establish.

Signs
- Seedlings suddenly collapse or wilt at soil level
- Stems may become soft, water-soaked, and constricted at the base
- Fuzzy white or gray mold
- Seeds may fail to germinate, or young plants may rot soon after sprouting

Control methods
- Use sterile potting mix and clean containers for starting seeds
- Avoid overwatering and ensure good drainage in trays or pots

Give your plants the best start possible; use clean pots and seed trays, good quality compost and clean water. Ensure good air circulation, try not to wet the leaves when watering, and ensure there's good drainage. Use natural treatments where possible

NATURAL PEST CONTROL METHODS

Companion planting
– Plant marigolds to deter aphids and whitefly
– Use nasturtiums as a 'trap crop' for cabbage white butterflies

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Physical barriers
– Use netting or fleece to protect crops from birds and insects
– Place copper tape around pots to deter slugs and snails

Handpicking
– Remove larger pests like caterpillars and slugs by hand
– Drop them into soapy water or relocate far from the garden

Encourage beneficial insects
– Plant flowers like alyssum and cosmos to attract ladybirds and hoverflies, which eat aphids
– Create habitats for beneficial insects with bug hotels or log piles

Biological controls
– Introduce nematodes to control slugs, vine weevils, and other soil-dwelling pests
– Use *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) to control caterpillars

Organic sprays
– Use a soap spray (2 tablespoons of liquid soap per litre of water) for soft-bodied insects
– Apply neem oil to control a variety of pests

Cultural practices
– Practise crop rotation to break pest and disease cycles
– Remove and destroy diseased plant material promptly

Traps
– Use yellow sticky traps for flying insects like whitefly
– Set up beer traps for slugs and snails

Water management
– Water plants in the morning to allow foliage to dry, reducing fungal diseases
– Use drip irrigation or soaker hoses to keep foliage dry

Pruning and spacing
– Ensure good air circulation by proper pruning and plant spacing to reduce fungal diseases

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Neem oil for pest control

Neem oil is a natural, plant-based pesticide extracted from the neem tree. It's effective against many garden pests like aphids, whiteflies, spider mites, and some fungal diseases (eg powdery mildew). It's eco-friendly, biodegradable, and safe for humans, pets, and beneficial insects when used correctly.

Store neem oil in a cool, dark place, and mix fresh for each use

How to use

1. Mixing
Combine 2 teaspoons of neem oil with 1 litre of water. Add a few drops of liquid soap to help mix it.

2. Application
Spray affected plants, including the underside of leaves. Apply in the early morning or late afternoon to avoid sun damage. Use weekly for infestations, or every 2-3 weeks for prevention.

WHEN TO USE CHEMICAL CONTROLS

While natural methods are preferable, there may be times when chemical intervention is necessary to save a plant or crop. Consider chemical controls as a last resort when:

1. Natural methods have been tried and proven ineffective
2. The pest or disease is spreading rapidly and threatening to kill plants
3. The problem is affecting a large portion of your garden
4. You're dealing with a particularly persistent or damaging pest or disease

If you decide to use chemical controls:
– Choose the least toxic option that will effectively address the problem
– Always read and follow label instructions carefully
– Apply at the right time of day (usually early morning or late evening) to minimise impact on beneficial insects
– Avoid applying on windy days to prevent drift
– Wear appropriate protective gear (gloves, long sleeves, etc.)
– Keep children and pets away from treated areas for the recommended time

Types of chemical controls

Insecticides: Target insect pests
Fungicides: Control fungal diseases
Herbicides: Manage weeds (use with extreme caution in gardens).

Even organic-approved pesticides can harm beneficial insects if used improperly. Always use any control method, natural or chemical, judiciously and as part of an integrated pest management approach.

Integrated pest management (IPM)

IPM is a holistic approach to pest control that focuses on long-term prevention through a combination of techniques:

Monitoring: Regularly inspect plants for signs of pests or diseases
Prevention: Use resistant varieties, proper sanitation, and cultural practices
Threshold levels: Determine acceptable levels of pest presence before taking action
Multiple tactics: Employ a variety of control methods, starting with the least harmful
Evaluation: Assess the effectiveness of control methods and adjust as needed

By adopting an IPM approach, you can maintain a healthy garden while minimising the use of chemical controls and promoting a balanced ecosystem. A diverse, healthy garden is naturally more resistant to pests and diseases. Focus on building soil health, planting a variety of species, and creating habitats for beneficial insects and wildlife to foster a resilient garden ecosystem.

Did you know... A mix of water and mild dish soap can effectively combat aphids and other soft-bodied insects. Crushed eggshells scattered around plants deter slugs and snails, while also adding calcium to the soil. Sprinkling cinnamon on soil can prevent fungal diseases in seedlings

Troubleshooting

Common challenges for new gardeners

Stepping into the world of gardening can be an exciting but daunting experience for beginners. While the prospect of nurturing plants and creating a lush garden is exciting, new gardeners often find themselves facing challenges they haven't met before. Here are some tips to help you with the most common things that might crop up in your first season.

Plan, plan, plan

Take time to plan your garden layout. Consider factors such as plant mature sizes, flowering/harvesting times, and colour schemes. Plan for succession planting to ensure year-round interest.

Create a scaled drawing of your garden space. This doesn't need to be a precise CAD plan; just sketch out the beds and any permanent features such as paths, beds and trees. Research the mature sizes of plants and represent them accurately in your plan. Consider the sun's movement across your garden throughout the day and seasons. Plan pathways for easy access to all areas of your garden. Include a mix of perennials for structure and annuals for seasonal colour. Consider incorporating elements like water features or seating areas. A well-thought-out plan will create a more balanced, aesthetically pleasing, and manageable garden, but don't be afraid to change your plans if something isn't working. A garden is a living thing, but it doesn't read the books!

Understand plant requirements

Each plant has specific needs for sunlight, water, and soil conditions. Research before planting to ensure you place sun-loving plants in sunny spots and shade-preferring plants in shadier areas. Group plants with similar watering needs together.

Create a garden journal or use a gardening app to keep track of each plant's requirements. Note down sunlight exposure, watering frequency, and any special care instructions. Observe how your plants respond to their environment and adjust their care accordingly. Careful planning and observation will result in healthier plants and reduce the risk of pest and disease issues.

Overenthusiastic planting

It's easy to get carried away by the colourful displays at garden centres or enticing descriptions in seed catalogues. However, resist the urge to plant too much too soon. Overplanting leads to overcrowded beds, competition for resources, and overwhelming maintenance.

Start small and expand gradually as you gain experience. Begin with a few hardy, easy-to-grow plants. As you learn to care for these successfully, slowly introduce new varieties. Create a planting plan that allows for proper

spacing between plants, considering their mature sizes. This will help you manage your garden more effectively and enjoy the process without feeling overwhelmed.

Prioritise soil quality

Don't underestimate the importance of good soil. It's the powerhouse behind all plant growth, and different plants thrive in different soil types, so take the time to prepare your soil properly. Use a soil test to discover its composition and pH level.

Based on the test results, amend your soil as needed. Add organic matter such as compost, well-rotted manure, or leaf mould to improve soil

structure and fertility. If your soil is too acidic or alkaline, adjust the pH using lime or sulphur as appropriate. Check your soil regularly, ideally every spring and autumn, to maintain its quality. Good, healthy soil will support robust, healthy plant growth throughout the seasons.

Master watering techniques

Achieving the right balance in watering is crucial. Overwatering can lead to root rot, while underwatering stresses plants and impedes growth. Learn the specific watering needs of your plants and adapt to seasonal changes.

Check soil moisture regularly by inserting your finger about an inch into the soil. If it feels dry at this depth, it's time to water. Water deeply but less frequently to encourage strong root growth. Water should be applied at the base of plants rather than on the foliage to prevent fungal diseases. If you have a large garden or find watering is taking up too much of your time, you could consider installing a drip irrigation system or using soaker hoses but don't get over-reliant on these. It's important that you still 'visit' your plants even if you aren't watering them. That way, you can keep an eye on their condition and spot any early signs of problems. During hot spells, water early in the morning or late in the evening to minimise evaporation.

Learn to identify pests and diseases

Early detection of pest infestations or plant diseases is key to maintaining a healthy garden. Familiarise yourself with common pests and diseases in your area, but don't get anxious about it and worry before it's happened! Nature has a way of balancing itself, and if you miss something for a week or so, it most likely won't be the end of the world. Blight is probably the only exception, as it can run through a greenhouse full of tomatoes or a row of potatoes very quickly. Inspect your plants regularly, looking at both upper and lower leaf surfaces.

Invest in a good magnifying glass to help spot tiny pests like spider mites. Learn to recognise signs of common problems such as yellowing leaves, spots, or unusual growth patterns. If you notice any unusual signs, research or ask local gardening experts for proper identification and treatment. Consider using companion planting techniques to deter pests naturally. Remember, not all insects are harmful – learn to identify beneficial insects that help control pest populations.

Don't forget... Many weeds are actually beneficial. Dandelions attract pollinators and their deep roots bring up nutrients. Clover fixes nitrogen in the soil, improving fertility. Nettles make an excellent natural fertiliser 'tea'

RHS hardiness ratings

Hardiness ratings are determined by the lowest temperature a plant is likely to withstand. These ratings provide an overview of plant hardiness using one of the nine categories, H1a to H7. This is a general guide to growing conditions and should be used as a guideline only, as many other factors could affect a plant's overall hardiness.

H1a – Tropical: Needs a heated greenhouse; minimum temperature above +15°C. Suitable for tropical plants.

H1b – Subtropical: Needs to be grown indoors or in a heated greenhouse; minimum temperature +10°C to +15°C.

H1c – Warm temperate: Can be grown outside in summer in warm, sheltered spots; minimum temperature +5°C to +10°C.

H2 – Tender: Can be grown outdoors in frost-free locations; minimum temperature 0°C to +5°C.

H3 – Half hardy: Tolerates temperatures down to -5°C; may need protection in winter.

H4 – Hardy: Tolerates temperatures down to -10°C to -5°C; suitable for most of the UK, but may need protection in colder areas.

H5 – Hardy: Tolerates temperatures down to -15°C to -10°C; suitable for colder regions of the UK.

H6 – Very hardy: Tolerates temperatures down to -20°C to -15°C; suitable for very cold parts of the UK.

H7 – Fully hardy: Tolerates temperatures below -20°C; extremely hardy and suitable for the coldest parts of the UK and similar climates.

• See more at **rhs.org.uk**

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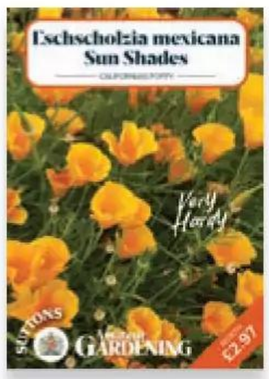

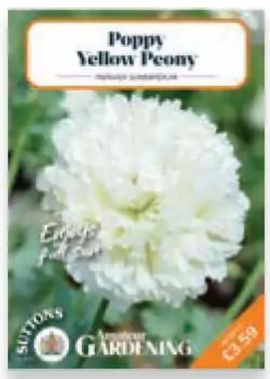

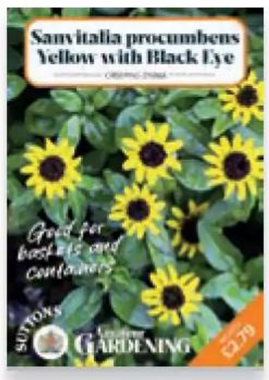

Get sowing now...

Aquilegia 'Chocolate Soldier' *Aquilegia viridiflora*

Perfect for rockeries and borders, collector's item

- **Flowers:** May, June, July
- **Sow:** February to June or September to October
- **Position:** Full sun, sun or semi-shade
- **Height:** 30-35cm (12-14")
- **Spread:** 30-35cm (12-14")
- **Care:** Gradually acclimatise plants to cooler conditions for a few weeks before planting out after all risk of frost, 30cm (12in) apart. Overwinter September sowings in a coldframe and plant out the following spring.

Cornflower 'Mixed' *Centaurea moschata*

Large, sweetly scented flowers

- **Flowers:** May, June, July
- **Sow:** March to April or August to September
- **Position:** Full sun
- **Height:** Height: 60cm (24")
- **Spread:** 30cm (12")
- **Care:** Sow direct outdoor, dislikes root disturbance. Autumn sowings flower the following year. Deadhead regularly. Great for cutting.

Californian Poppy 'Sun Shades' *Eschscholzia mexicana*

Tough and drought-tolerant

- **Flowers:** June, July, August
- **Sow:** March to May or August to September
- **Position:** Full sun
- **Height:** 30cm (12")
- **Spread:** 30cm (12")
- **Care:** Direct sow outdoors from March to May or in September for overwintering. Autumn sowings will flower in late spring. Alternatively, sow indoors from February to March at 15-21°C (60-70°F). Grow on at cooler temps.

Foxglove 'Silver Cub' *Digitalis purpurea*

Silvery soft foliage that feels like puppies' ears!

- **Flowers:** May, June, July
- **Sow:** January to June
- **Position:** Sun or semi-shade, dappled shade
- **Height:** 60cm (24")
- **Spread:** 45cm (18")
- **Care:** Flowers in its first year from a January sowing. Later sowings can be overwintered in a cold frame and planted out the following spring after all risk of frost has passed. Water regularly until fully established.

Catmint 'Blue Moon' *Nepeta nervosa*

Long-flowering, low-maintenance

- **Flowers:** June to September
- **Sow:** February to June, September to October
- **Position**: Sun or semi-shade
- **Height:** 30-40cm (12-16")
- **Spread:** 20cm (8")
- **Care:** Sow into moist seed compost and cover with a fine sprinkling of compost or vermiculite. Keep at between 15-20°C (59-68°F). After sowing, do not exclude light. Keep the surface of the compost moist.

Poppy 'Yellow Peony ' *Papaver somniferum*

Stunning planted en masse

- **Flowers:** June, July, August
- **Sow:** March, April or July, August outdoors
- **Position:** Full sun
- **Height:** 60-90cm (24-36")
- **Spread:** 30cm (12")
- **Care:** Striking pom-pom blooms that stand out above the tidy grey-green foliage. Very eye-catching in borders when planted en masse. Sow in situ; Autumn sowings will flower the following year.

Creeping Zinnia 'Yellow with Black Eye'

Sanvitalia procumbens

Excellent for containers and baskets

- **Flowers:** June to October
- **Sow:** February, March, April
- **Position:** Sun or semi-shade
- **Height:** 25cm (10")
- **Spread:** 45cm (18")
- **Care:** Sow onto moist compost and lightly cover with vermiculite. Place into a propagator at 18-20°C (65-70°F). Germination takes 14-21 days. Sowing Depth: 1.5mm (1/16in).

Caucasian Scabious 'Perfection Blue' *Scabiosa caucasica*

AKA the Butterfly Flower, great for pollinators

- **Flowers:** July, August, September
- **Sow:** February to June
- **Position:** Full sun
- **Height:** 60cm (24")
- **Spread:** 45cm (18")
- **Care:** 'Perfection Blue' is easy to grow, and once established, it requires virtually no maintenance. A lovely choice for a sunny spot in the garden and makes a pleasing cut flower. Water until fully established. Deadhead regularly. Lift and divide in spring.

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