



THE GARDEN GUIDE

Your Cheat Sheet to Grow a Better Garden

AMBER BENGE

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DEAR NEW GARDENER,

Planting a garden can be intimidating, especially if you've never grown a successful garden in the past. I want to help you build a garden that is both lovely and productive, providing your family with joy and beauty and fresh food right from your backyard.

My own gardening journey has taught me many things about growing food, but I have found the spiritual growth in the garden just as rewarding. There is something about putting your hands in the dirt that just awakens the soul. Now I understand why God chose a garden as the perfect place to create people. We were meant to be in the garden!

Learning to garden is a process, my friend. I want to tell you that upfront from this very first page. My first garden was one simple wooden garden box. My children were toddlers and I thought it would

be a good way for us to spend more time outdoors and get our abundantly picky little ones to try vegetables. Was it a success? Sort of. I didn't get a huge harvest, but a seed was planted in my heart at the same time I put those seeds in the soil. It would be years before I could really pursue it.

Ten years later, we moved back to our hometown and I decided to try gardening again, this time going the old-fashioned route. We borrowed a tractor and a plow and created a 25x40 foot garden. I spent a small fortune on plants at the garden center and then planted row after row of tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, squash, and green beans.

When the planting was done, I set up a sprinkler and sat back and waited on my huge harvest to start rolling in. Three months later, that garden bed was a pit of weeds and mud, but we started harvesting a few squash, a few cucumbers, and a handful of beans here and there.

Looking back, I was in no way prepared to grow a successful garden. I wasn't really willing to give it daily attention to keep the weeds at bay and I was fighting an uphill battle with our native Carolina soil, which is hard, red clay.

The soil in my garden was so compacted that many of my plants were never able to establish healthy root systems. Tilling the ground only stirred up the weeds and that sprinkler watered unevenly so parts of the garden were drenched and muddy and others were as dry as the Sahara.

I learned several things that year. First, our native soil in North Carolina is NOT a friend to the brand new gardener. Secondly, the weed battle is won or lost at the beginning of the growing season, depending on your weed control strategy and mulch. Bare, uncovered soil is a magnet for weeds.

After that gardening season, I started to actually research how to grow vegetables. I bought stacks of books, watched hours of Youtube videos from other gardeners, and started talking to every old farmer I could find like they were my new best friends. I wanted to know all the secrets because I was dreaming of something big.

Our family began to talk about the possibilities of homesteading. It seemed like an impossible dream, but we felt drawn to a more self-sufficient lifestyle.

As time passed, we began to pray together as a family for the opportunity to start a small farm. In the midst of that, we were also going through some major changes. I was working two part-time jobs plus directing our local homeschool co-op and homeschooling my children. My husband, Josh, was planting a new church. Frankly, we were drowning.

The impact of the intense stress from that season brought me to my knees literally, as my health tanked. I developed an autoimmune disease and had severe shingles that caused permanent nerve damage to my left side. My cortisol levels shot sky high and my adrenal hormones started fluctuating to extremes, causing weight gain, fatigue, and anxiety.

Now I needed a garden for my health, because I couldn't afford to buy organic produce consistently. So our homesteading dream grew more intense and we thought about it constantly. Then one night, my husband called me to come to the computer. He had found a little piece of land about 5 miles from our home. It was going to be auctioned off and the price was so low that we figured it must be too good to be true.

The next day, we drove to look at the land and fell completely in love. It was three acres of potential paradise, surrounded by towering pines. There was a creek, a large pasture, and a rundown mobile home that was completely uninhabitable.

Thankfully, my husband has a background in construction and said the house could be salvaged. After an intense bidding war, we bought our little piece of homestead heaven here in western North Carolina and then the real fun began.

Based on the research I had done, I knew a raised bed garden would be our best choice. Not only did we have the hard, red clay to contend with, but the new property was intensely rocky.

One month after we moved into the remodeled farmhouse, Josh built nine garden beds. I ordered some seeds and bought some plants and started gardening again. But this time everything was different.

During that first growing season on our new farm, I was amazed at the difference in my harvests! Forget a measly handful of green beans...
now

I was picking bushel baskets of beans, tomatoes, peppers, and so much more. Starting with a healthy soil and using deep mulch to protect it, I suddenly saw just how prolific a garden can be when you give it the right conditions.

As time marches on, I continually fall in love with the garden over and over again. Now my garden includes 20 raised beds plus a large in-ground garden, which we built with a no-dig method (more on that later). We are currently growing almost all of our vegetables and I rarely have to buy produce from a grocery store.

We have seen the benefits of gardening in our family. My health is on the road to restoration. These days, I homestead and homeschool the children full-time. I've lost 40 pounds and continue to slowly lose the weight I gained during those hard years. Everyone now loves eating fresh homegrown food and my teenagers eat far more vegetables than most of their friends.

Growing a garden has taught me the value of abiding. A successful garden requires patiently and consistently showing up to give it careful attention and nurturing. But the work in the garden feeds the soul and the rewards are worth every bit of blood, sweat, and tears.

As I have reflected back over my gardening journey, I have often wished I had a little cheat sheet when I started. It would have been so helpful to know what can I safely use to get rid of pests, what month I should be planting seeds, and how to handle the war with the weeds.

So that's why I've created The Garden Guide. I want to give you a concise, quick reference book that you can go to when you have problems pop up in your garden. I hope the information in these pages will help you troubleshoot issues and enjoy an abundant harvest during your next growing season.

May God bless you on your journey in the garden. Thanks for letting me be your new garden best friend.

Many Blessings to You,



BUILDING A NEW GARDEN

So you're ready to build a garden? Congratulations! Exciting things are ahead for you. Learning to garden is like any other new skill you pursue. It takes time, effort, and research, but the rewards are well worth all the hard work.

The first step is to decide where to place your garden. You'll need to consider factors such as soil quality, sunlight, drainage, and wildlife. Let's break it down into simple steps so you can quickly locate the right spot to plant that garden of your dreams.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- How is your soil? Is it sandy or clay? Loose dirt or hard packed? Grab a shovel and dig a bit to see what the soil looks like under the surface.
- What is currently occupying the space? Do you have grass that needs to be removed? Weeds?
- Do you have wildlife that could put your garden at risk? Deer, rabbits, gophers? You may need to fence your garden area if you live in an area with a lot of wildlife.
- Do you have access to water? Your garden will need to be watered and hauling a watering can back and forth will get old fast. Choose a location where water will be accessible either for a watering hose or drip lines, whichever you decide to use.
- How many hours of sunlight does your space receive? Are some areas more shaded than others?

If you want to pursue in-ground gardening, start by choosing a location that gets adequate sunlight. Full sun is considered 6-8 hours a day of direct sunlight. Partial sun is 3-6 hours of direct sunlight. Full shade areas would have less than 3 hours of sunlight per day.

Different crops have varied sunlight requirements so you can choose what to plant based on the amount of sun your garden receives.

Vegetable gardens really need full sun to get the best harvests. Take time to watch the pattern of how the sun moves across your property for a few days to see which area gets the best sunlight.

If you are dealing with a shady lot and don't have the option to plant in full sun, you can still grow some things that tolerate shade. Plants like kale, peas, beets, radishes, carrots, and potatoes can grow in shady spaces, but they may take longer to grow than in a sunny area.

WHAT KIND OF GARDEN SHOULD YOU GROW?

Next, it's time to decide what kind of garden you want to grow. There are lots of options, ranging from a traditional in-ground garden to raised beds or containers. Let's take a quick look at all three options and then you can decide which one will be the best fit for your space.

IN-GROUND GARDEN

The cheapest option to start a garden is to grow right in the ground. You won't have the start up costs of building beds or buying soil, but you will most likely face more weed pressure.

Before you decide on this option, ask yourself if you can you physically bend and squat to tend to a garden in the ground. The physical strain of this method might be a deal breaker for some gardeners who have problems kneeling or bending.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Deal with weeds before you begin. Lay out a black plastic tarp or a thick layer of cardboard over the entire area where you plan to place your garden.

Leave this in place for 2-3 months to kill off any grass or weeds that would be hidden underneath. The idea here is to block the sunlight and kill anything that is growing in the space where you will put the garden.

If you don't have the time to prep your space for a few months, you can still grow a very successful garden using a no-dig method.



Cover the entire space with a thick layer of cardboard. Then pile 10-12 inches of new soil on top. The cardboard will smother any grass or weeds over time and it will eventually break down to become part of the garden. This no-dig method eliminates the need for a tiller and makes building a new garden from scratch pretty simple.

You will need to purchase soil, but you can often find it on sale at garden centers during the spring. Another option is to buy soil by the truck load. If you need a lot of soil, that's usually most budget-friendly option.

RAISED BED GARDEN

Raised beds are a great option for those that don't want to battle difficult native soil conditions or want an off-ground option to reduce the physical demands of gardening. It's also a great starter method for new gardeners because you have more precise control over your soil conditions, which ultimately lends itself to a better harvest.

If your soil conditions are less than ideal for planting or you find that weeds overtake your garden quickly, the raised bed garden might be perfect for you.



TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Raised bed garden boxes can be built from a variety of materials. Get creative and see what you can find to repurpose into a new garden bed. Old fence posts, logs, large rocks, and bricks can all be used to build garden boxes.

If you want to build wooden boxes, choose cedar or cypress because they are resistant to rot and will hold up to the elements. Pressure treated lumber is another option for building garden boxes.

You can design your boxes in any size, shape, or dimension that you like.

Keep in mind that deep raised beds require more soil to fill them and it can settle and compact over time. You only need 10-12 inches of soil in your bed for growing most vegetables.

The process of setting up raised beds is the very same as creating an in-ground garden with the no dig method. Layers of cardboard go in the bottom, overlapping under the sides if possible for maximum weed barrier. Then fill the beds with a good, nutrient-rich soil. .

CONTAINER GARDEN

Maybe you don't have the space to plant a garden because you live in an apartment or dorm room. Perhaps you live in a rental and the landlord won't agree to let you build a garden. You can still grow food right where you live as long as you access to some sunlight. A sunny balcony or patio is all you need to grow a garden.

Before I grew food in the ground or in raised beds, I grew in 5-gallon buckets. Drill some drainage holes in the bottom and fill your buckets or pots with good soil. You can grow a wide variety of vegetables and herbs in containers.



WHAT TO GROW IN CONTAINERS

- Lettuce
- Kale
- Swiss Chard
- Potatoes
- Tomatoes (dwarf or determinate)
- Radishes
- Beets
- Bell Peppers
- Hot Peppers
- Bush Beans
- Basil
- Lavender
- Sage
- Rosemary
- Lemon Balm

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Water frequently in the hottest months. Soil in pots or containers dries out quickly so you may need to water more often.

Container gardens also require extra fertilizer. The plants will quickly deplete the soil of its nutrients so make sure you fertilize your container plants on a regular basis, usually every two weeks.



STARTING SEEDS

"I planted all the seeds, but hardly anything came up. What am I doing wrong?" This is a question I get asked over and over as I do garden coaching. It's a common misconception that you can stick a seed in the dirt, give it a splash of water, and a garden will magically appear soon after. If only it was that easy, right?

Seed germination can be tricky and some seeds will require more delicate treatment than others. To complicate matters further, some plants grow best when you plant the seeds directly out into the garden, while others will struggle to germinate in outdoor conditions and need the TLC of grow lights and a heat mat or a warm greenhouse.

To simplify the science of germination and give you a quick start for your garden, here is a look at the best method for each kind of seed.

START SEEDS INDOORS:

Basil
Bell Peppers
Broccoli
Cabbage
Cantaloupe
Cauliflower
Celery
Cucumbers
Eggplant
Kale
Kohlrabi
Lettuce
Oregano
Pumpkins
Rosemary
Sage
Squash
Swiss chard
Thyme
Tomatoes
Watermelon
Zucchini



PLANT DIRECTLY IN GARDEN:

Arugula
Beets
Carrots
Chives
Cilantro
Corn
Dill
Green Beans
Okra
Onions
Parsley
Parsnips
Peas
Potatoes
Radishes
Spinach
Turnips

A WORD ABOUT SEED STARTING

For the beginner gardener, seed starting can feel really intimidating. If that's where you're at, skip it. Buy started plants from a local nursery or from another gardener in your area. This does not make you less of a gardener and it will eliminate a lot of potential problems.

When you are growing your first garden, you need some wins. Otherwise, you'll be tempted to quit. Starting with established plants is always my recommendation for a new gardener.

If you are ready to jump in and try seed starting, here are my best tips to help you be successful.

- Use a loose, light soil. Look for seed starting potting mixes.
- Keep the soil damp until plants have established their first true leaves. It will dry out quickly and germinating seeds need moisture.
- Bottom water seedlings if possible to reduce fungal issues.
- Provide warmth and light. Most seeds need a minimum of 68 degrees (F) to germinate and at least 12-14 hours of light per day.
- Plant two seeds per pot in case you don't get great germination. If both seeds germinate, you can thin out extra seedlings to give each one plenty of room to germinate.
- Make sure to harden off your seedlings before you move them to the garden. This transition is critical. Start by exposing plants to the outdoors for a few hours a day and keep a close eye on them for any wilting or signs of distress. Gradually increase the amount of time the seedlings spend outdoors until they are accustomed to the environment. This can take 3-7 days.
- Plant your seedlings into the garden on an overcast day or in the early morning. This will reduce the stress the plant experiences as it tries to adjust to its new surroundings.
- If you are planting seeds directly into your garden, make sure to keep the soil moist until they germinate and the plants are well established. Follow spacing recommendations on your seed packages.



PLANTING DATES

There are many factors can impact your garden. Is it getting enough water? Is your soil healthy? Are you planting the right things in the right time of year?

My first big lesson was learning what to plant and when in our zone (7B). Knowing your garden zone will help you so much because you can literally just go online and look up what to plant in the current month for your particular area.

Go to [Almanac.com](https://www.almanac.com) to find your personalized planting dates for FREE! This is one of the best free resources online for gardeners. Scroll down to the "Gardening" section and then look for the box that says, "Get Your Planting Dates". From there, you will enter your zip code to get custom dates for your garden.

PLANT THE RIGHT THINGS AT THE RIGHT TIME

My first garden didn't do too well because I had not learned the appropriate timing for different crops. I started seeds in the spring and put them on my portable greenhouse shelves on the back deck and figured as long as I gave them a little water along the way, they would do just fine. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite that simple. I planted all the wrong things to start!

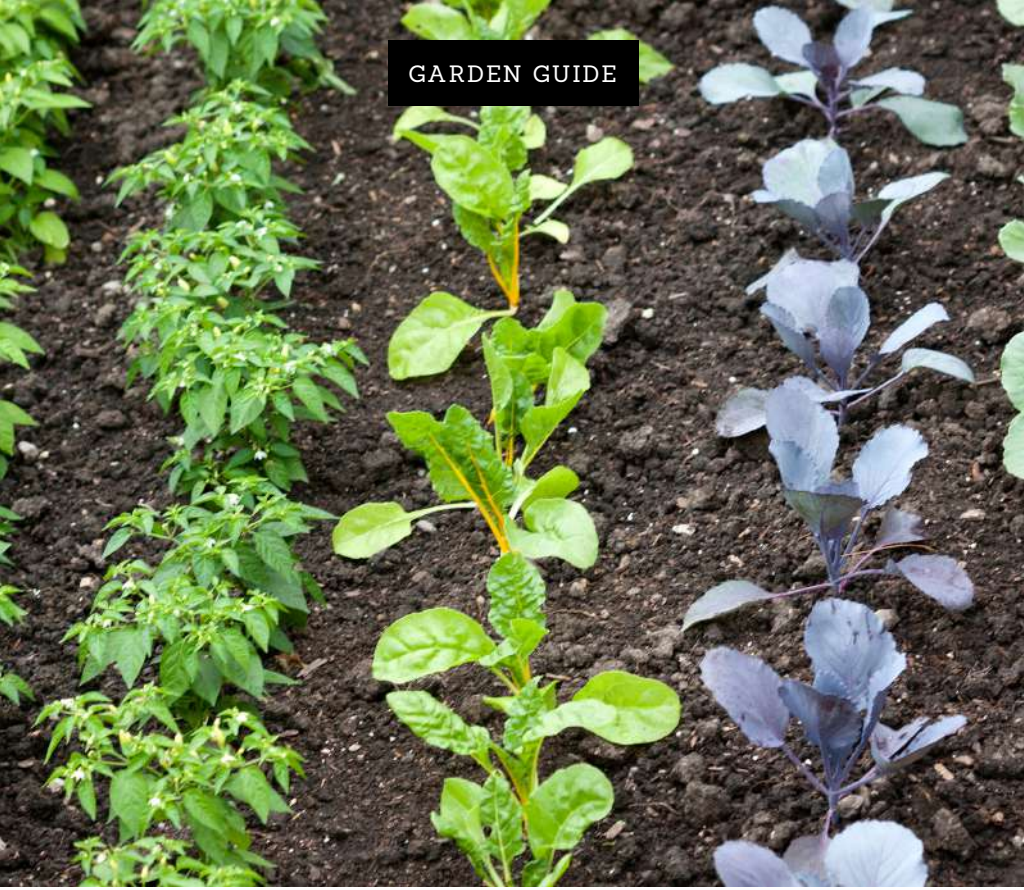
Here in western NC, there are basically three gardening seasons: spring, summer, and fall. You can grow a few things in winter, but not a lot. For my spring garden, I tried to plant summer crops. They couldn't handle the unpredictable temperatures and cold nights and most of them died before they ever came out of the seed trays. Some didn't germinate at all.

Like a good scientist, I didn't give up. Once warmer weather came around, I replanted the summer crops and this time, I had better results. I learned that starting things from seeds is tedious and baby plants are very delicate. I felt like those little seedlings would die if I looked at them the wrong way sometimes!

I ended up doing a 50/50 approach to summer gardening. I relied on plant starts from local nurseries for 50 percent of my garden and I started seeds for the other half. I also learned that sometimes it's better to direct sow the seeds into the garden, instead of using those seed trays. Some plants came up nicely in the seed trays, but they just couldn't survive transplanting.

Once I understood the seasons of gardening, I was able to successfully start my plants from seed the next year. If this is your first year gardening or you have struggled to grow a successful garden in the past, it might all be due to timing.

Check your custom planting dates on Almanac.com and you'll be better equipped for success. Keep in mind that some plants are "frost tender" and some are "frost hardy". Most seed packets will tell you what temperatures the plant can withstand so always double check those recommendations.



































4X8 LAYOUTS

































Whether you are building an in-ground garden or a raised bed garden, it can be tricky to figure out how to layout your garden beds. Each plant will need to have adequate space for the roots to grow and get nutrients. If you overcrowd plants, they won't reach their true potential.

To make this simple for beginner gardeners, the next few pages contain a variety of garden bed layouts that you can use to set up your garden this year. I chose to use the 4x8 bed size because that is what I use most commonly in my own garden. These layouts can give you confidence in how to arrange a new garden to get the best harvest.

































Spring/Fall

 Arugula	 Cabbage	 Cabbage	 Onion
 Arugula	 Cabbage	 Cabbage	 Onion
 Arugula	 Cabbage	 Cabbage	 Onion
 Arugula	 Cabbage	 Cabbage	 Onion
 Arugula	 Broccoli	 Broccoli	 Onion
 Arugula	 Broccoli	 Broccoli	 Onion
 Arugula	 Broccoli	 Broccoli	 Onion
 Arugula	 Broccoli	 Broccoli	 Onion











Spring/Fall

 Carrots	 Lettuce	 Lettuce	 Beets
 Carrots	 Cauliflower	 Cauliflower	 Beets
 Carrots	 Cauliflower	 Cauliflower	 Beets
 Carrots	 Cauliflower	 Cauliflower	 Beets
 Carrots	 Brussel Sprouts	 Brussel Sprouts	 Beets
 Carrots	 Brussel Sprouts	 Brussel Sprouts	 Beets
 Carrots	 Brussel Sprouts	 Brussel Sprouts	 Beets
 Carrots	 Lettuce	 Lettuce	 Beets

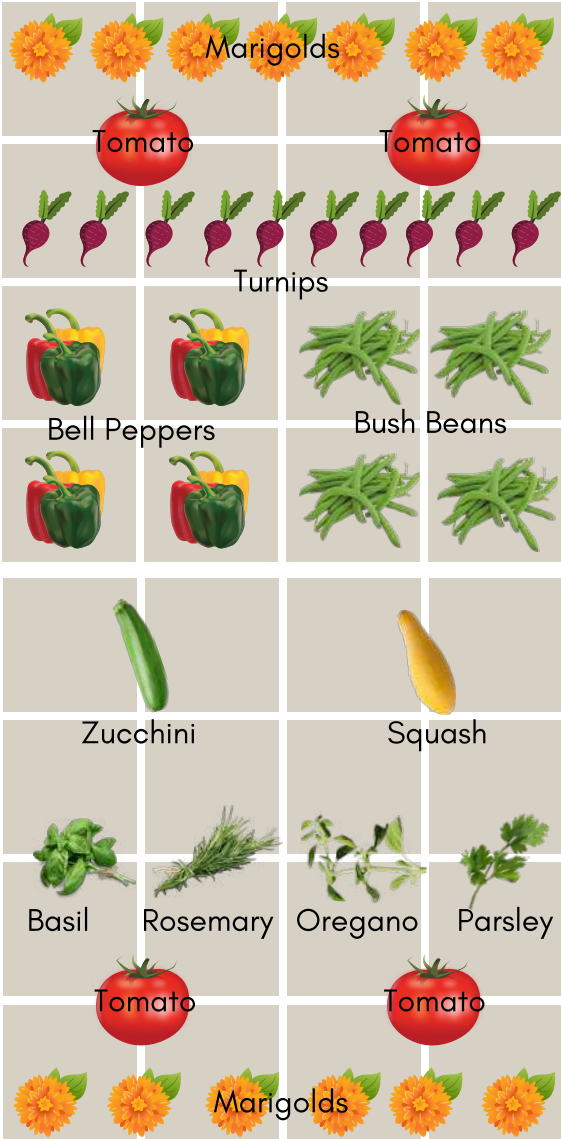
Spring/Fall

 Peas	 Peas	 Peas	 Peas
 Radishes	 Radishes	 Carrots	 Carrots
 Radishes	 Radishes	 Carrots	 Carrots
 Radishes	 Radishes	 Carrots	 Carrots
 Kale	 Kale	 Cabbage	 Cabbage
 Kale	 Kale	 Cabbage	 Cabbage
 Kale	 Kale	 Cabbage	 Cabbage
 Peas	 Peas	 Peas	 Peas

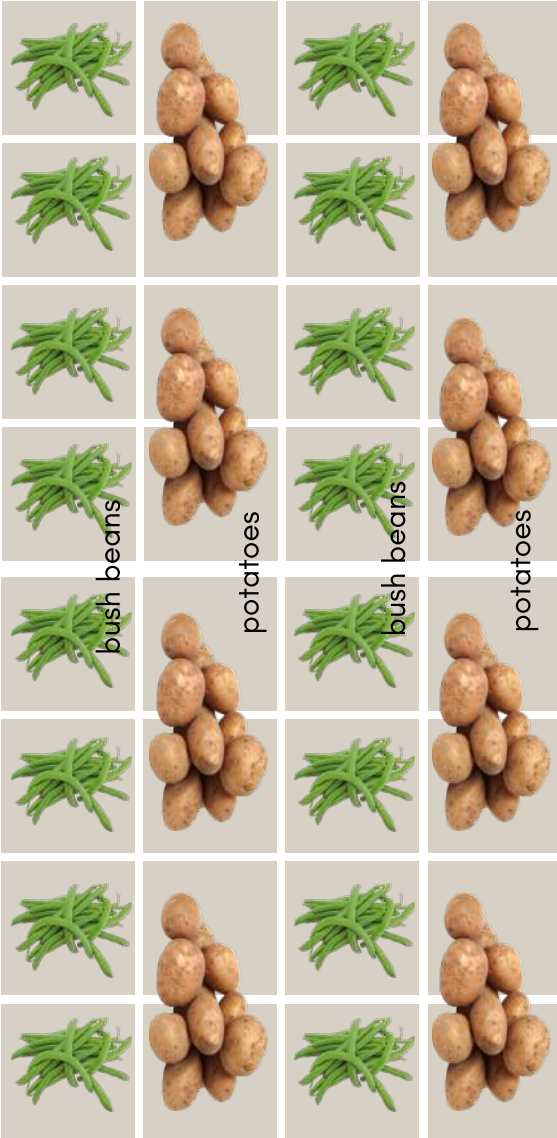
Summer Salsa Garden

 <p>Tomato</p>	 <p>Bell Peppers</p> 
 <p>Tomato</p>	 <p>Cilantro</p>
 <p>Tomato</p>	 <p>Cilantro</p>
 <p>Tomato</p>	 <p>Spicy Peppers</p> 

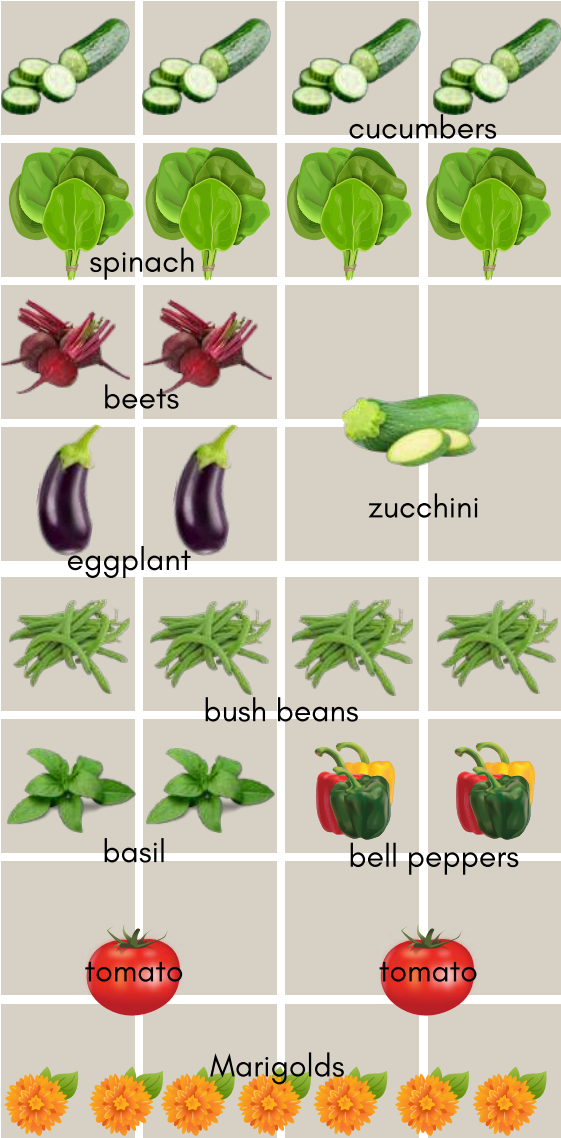
Summer All-in-One Kitchen Garden



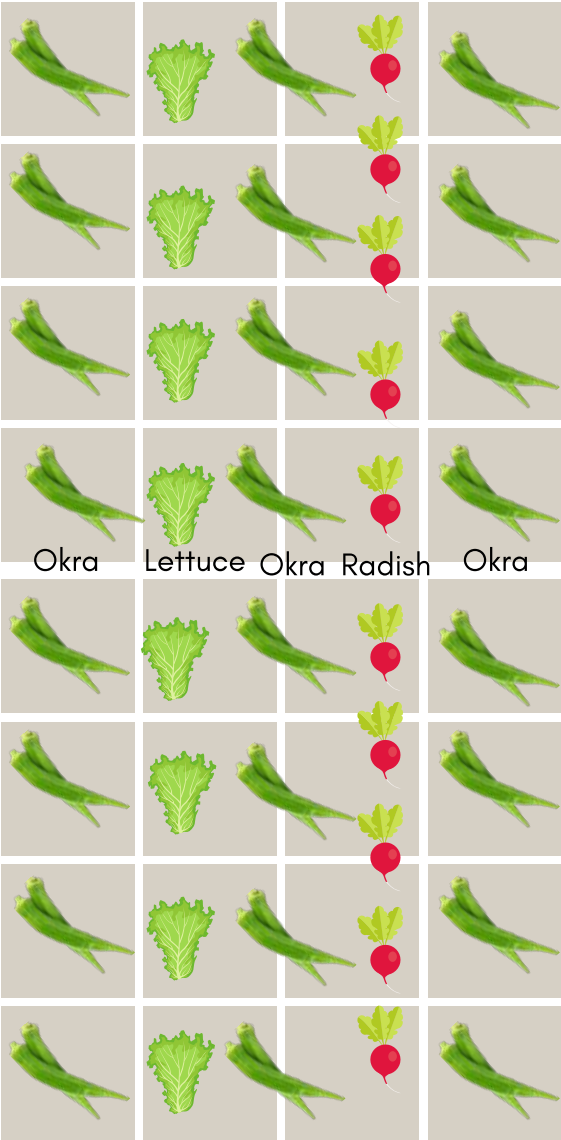
Summer














Summer



Summer



Herb Garden

Rosemary 	Basil 
Oregano 	Calendula 
Thyme 	Lemon Balm 
Sage 	Parsley 
Cilantro 	Dill 
	Chamomile 

Tea Garden



Chamomile



Mint



Lemon Balm



Lavender



Lemon Grass



Calendula



Nasturtium



Echinacea



Catnip



Rosemary



GROWING TIPS AND TRICKS

There are endless methods for growing a garden and they can vary wildly depending on who you talk to and where they live. Sometimes all of that advice can get overwhelming so in this chapter, you'll find advice for various aspects of gardening separated into short, easy to read chunks so you can quickly reference them as needed through the growing season. I've included some old wives tales here as well and you might be surprised at how many of those actually work!

HEIRLOOM VS HYBRID SEEDS

If you spend much time reading about gardening, you'll encounter these two terms frequently. Don't let it confuse you. Heirloom seeds are simply a variety that has been passed down for 50+ years. Heirlooms are a good choice if you want to save seeds from year to year to cut down on expenses. There's also something rewarding for me to grow varieties that I know have been around for generations.

Hybrid seeds come from plants that have been selectively bred for certain attributes. Typically hybrid seeds are designed to grow fast, harvest early, and withstand pests and transportation. You can still save hybrid seeds, but make sure you are choosing "open pollinated" hybrids if you want to save seeds.

I mostly grow heirloom seeds in my garden, but I do try hybrids on occasion. There's no need to fear GMO's when dealing with home garden seeds. The GMO seeds that tend to be worrisome are used in large commercial farm plantings and won't be the same as seeds sold to the home gardener.

ORGANIC GARDENING

In recent years, the term "organic" has become a buzzword among gardeners and homesteaders, but it is frequently misunderstood. At the most basic definition, organic gardening is simply using natural gardening methods. It's avoiding toxic, chemical pesticides so your food is safe to eat right as you pick it, without the need to run inside and wash off dangerous chemicals.

We follow organic gardening methods on our farm, but we do use some natural pest control methods to keep the bugs at bay and I plant more than I need to harvest to leave margin for what the bugs might take along the way.



ORGANIC PEST CONTROL

When you stop using commercial pesticides in your garden, you'll be amazed at how it changes. The entire ecosystem comes to life and you will start to notice more butterflies and bees. Of course, you'll also start encountering hornworms and slugs and frustrating pests too so it's important to know what you can use to safely treat them without introducing harmful chemicals to your garden or your family.

DIATOMACEOUS EARTH (DE)

DE is a white powder made from fossilized hard shell diatoms. DE works to kill hard-shelled insects by destroying their outer exoskeleton, so they dehydrate and die. DE can effectively treat squash bugs, slugs, snails, crickets, aphids, japanese beetles, and pill bugs. One word of caution here - DO NOT apply DE to flowers because it can harm pollinators. I use DE very sparingly if at all because of its potential harmful effect to bees. I think of this one as a last resort.

BACILLUS THURINGIENSIS (BT)

BT is the go to treatment for caterpillars and hornworms. It's a naturally occurring bacteria that causes insects to die when consumed in the larva stage. BT should be mixed with distilled water before applying it to the garden. If you have hard water, the alkalinity can actually kill those beneficial bacterial before they have a chance to help your garden.

NEEM OIL

The neem tree comes from Southern Asia and neem oil is made from cold-pressed neem seeds. Neem oil does not instantly kill all pests like a commercial insecticide, but it interrupts the life cycle of pests and suppresses the overall pest pressure in your garden. Neem works well for treating aphids, whiteflies, and mealybugs.

INSECTICIDAL SOAP

Looking for a budget friendly organic pest control option? This is it. Soap dries out insects and disrupts cell walls. Perhaps your grandparents dumped soapy dish water on the garden? This is why... it's for pest control. Some recipes also call for oil to be included, which suffocates insects and offers an added layer of protection.

You can buy organic insecticidal soaps at most gardening centers or you can make your own. Try combining a cup of vegetable oil, 1 tablespoon of liquid soap, 20 drops of peppermint essential oil. Mix it well and store it in a jar with your garden supplies.

When you need to treat the garden, combine one tablespoon of the soap with a quart of water in a spray bottle and liberally spray the plants. Make sure you spray the underside of the leaves. This is where many bugs and eggs will hide.

HAND PICKING

The absolute best way to defeat a pest infestation is to go out to the garden and start picking them off by hand. Sure, it takes a bit of extra time, but you can quickly remove the majority of the pest population in just a few minutes time and then follow the picking with insecticidal soap to add extra protection and pest prevention.

WHAT ABOUT THE WEEDS?

Weeds are a headache for every gardener, but it is much worse if you let it go for too long. Weeds can cause intense damage to the garden, stealing valuable nutrients from the soil and choking out the plants that you want to thrive. My weed control strategy is twofold...

First, start with a good weed barrier in place. This is why we line all of our beds and walkways with a thick double layer of cardboard before we add soil or mulch. The cardboard suppresses weeds so they aren't as aggressive and can be more easily managed.

Second, I do a daily 15 minute "weed walk" in the garden. This is usually early in the morning, with a cup of hot tea in hand and sometimes a good podcast or worship music playlist going in my earbuds. This has become a really enjoyable time for me. I actually look forward to pulling weeds!

Spending 15 minutes each day to pull weeds will keep things from getting out of control. Plus it gives me a chance to make a mental inventory of the garden tasks that I need to get accomplished for the day. It's a win-win!

WATERING METHODS

As you get deeper into your gardening journey, you can experiment with a variety of watering methods. Large gardens often benefit from drip tape and irrigation systems. Although, these are not necessary. Here in my garden, I still water everything by hand with a garden hose. It takes half an hour in the evening usually every other day. I water daily in the hottest, driest part of the summer, but the amount of water you need will depend on your climate.

When watering, avoid wetting the leaves as this can lead to mildew and fungal issues. Focus on deep watering at the ground level. A slow steady water is much better than a fast blast. Dig down a few inches into the soil and feel for moisture to determine how much water your plants need. Your soil should be loose and moist, but not soggy. If you can squeeze a handful of soil together in your hand and it stays in a clump, your soil is wet enough. If it crumbles, you need more water.



GARDENING WIVES TALES

One of my favorite things is talking to older farmers, who have been gardening for decades. They have a wealth of knowledge about growing methods and sometimes they have some odd little tricks that really work. Gardening wives tales have been around for ages, but here is a look at some of the most common ones. As we go through them, we will look at which ones actually work and which ones are best left for legend and tall tales.

PLANT POTATOES ON GOOD FRIDAY - MYTH

This old tradition dates back to the 1500s. The Irish called potatoes "devil's food" and would plant on Good Friday to deter evil spirits that might harm the harvest. In reality, Good Friday is a day that changes year to year depending when Easter falls. Plant potatoes by your garden zone, not by holidays. If you plant too early, your plants can get freeze damage.

ADD SUGAR TO THE SOIL FOR SWEETER TOMATOES - MYTH

Adding sugar to the soil won't make your tomatoes sweeter, but it might give you a major ant infestation. The sweetness of tomatoes is determined by the variety of tomato and the photosynthesis process.

BURY BANANA PEELS UNDER PLANTS FOR BETTER HARVESTS - MAYBE

It's true that bananas are rich in potassium, which is a vital nutrient for many plants. Tossing a banana peel under the soil certainly won't hurt it, but if you struggle with wildlife, I'd skip this tip or try this alternative: Place your banana peels in a large mason jar and cover to the top with distilled water. Let the peels steep for several days to create a banana peel tea. Then throw away the peels and use the tea to water your garden.

SPRINKLE CRUSHED EGG SHELLS AROUND TOMATOES - TRUE

Eggshells are full of calcium, which can prevent blossom end-rot, a common problem for tomatoes. Some gardeners even crack a whole egg in the hole before they plant tomato plants. This is a smart trick that seems to work! Keep in mind that it takes a long time for egg shells to break down so crush them into a fine powder to help the soil access the nutrients.

PLANTS GROW BETTER IF YOU SING TO THEM - MAYBE

This myth was explored in detail on the Discovery Channel's show, called Myth Busters. After experimenting with this one, they found that playing heavy metal music to plants increased the growth rate. So crank up the music while you work in the garden. It turns out that your plants like music too.

PUT A BOWL OF BEER IN THE GARDEN TO CAPTURE SLUGS - TRUE

I experimented with this wives tale this year and I can tell you with certainty that it does work! Place a little bowl of beer in the garden and nestle it down into the soil. This will serve as a bait trap as snails and slugs will be attracted to the beer and fall in and die. Just empty your traps every few days and reset them to keep slugs and snails at bay.

USE A BLACK LIGHT TO FIND HORNWORMS ON TOMATOES - TRUE

Hornworms are the tomato grower's enemy. Those nasty little critters can devour an entire tomato plant in a single day so it's critical that you remove them as soon as you notice damage. Use a black light flashlight at night to hunt for hornworms. They will glow in the black light so you can easily spot them and remove them. Make sure you look under the leaves and examine the entire plant closely.

PLANT WHEN YOU CAN SIT BARE LEGGED ON THE GROUND - TRUE

How do you know if the ground is really warm enough to start planting a garden? This old timer's trick is a quick little cheat. If you can sit on the ground comfortably in shorts, the ground is probably warm enough to start planting your spring crops.





COMPANION PLANTS

When you plant your garden, the location of plants can make a big difference. Some plants will thrive side by side, while others can actually harm each other. Planting friendly plants together can provide shade regulation, improved soil health, and weed suppression. Companion planting can even prevent garden pest problems.

There is a lot of science and research that goes into this topic and it's definitely a fun area of gardening to study. If you don't have hours to pour over books, the next page will give you a quick cheat sheet to companion planting and plant partners that will work well together in your veggie garden.

TOMATOES



Friends: Basil, Marigolds, Carrots, Onion, Celery, Parsley, Lettuce, Spinach



Enemies: Cabbage, Peas, Beets, Corn, Rosemary, Dill, Fennel

PEPPERS



Friends: Basil, Onions, Oregano



Enemies: Beans

CUCUMBERS



Friends: Bush Beans, Nasturtiums, Lettuce, Peas, Radishes, Corn



Enemies: Sage

GREEN BEANS



Friends: Corn, Marigolds, Nasturtium



Enemies: Onion

SQUASH



Friends: Corn, bush beans, peas, radishes, dill, and marigolds



Enemies: Potatoes

CORN



Friends: beans, cucumbers, peas, pumpkins, and melons



Enemies: Tomatoes

CARROTS



Friends: Chives, Rosemary, Sage, Tomatoes



Enemies: Coriander, Dill, Parsnips

LETTUCE



Friends: Beans, beets, broccoli, carrots, corn, peas, radishes, and marigolds



Enemies: Parsley



THE NUMBER ONE RULE

Gardening is a topic where people have many opinions. You'll hear contradicting advice and sometimes feel confused by all the do's and don'ts that people share. You might even notice that I've broken some of my own rules here in this book.

Did you see that I put a bush bean next to a pepper on one of the garden diagrams? Technically according to companion planting methodology, that's a no-no. But have I done it? Yep. Did I grow both peppers and beans? Abundantly.

That brings me to the number one rule... Don't be afraid to break the rules!

Your garden is YOURS. That means you get the final say on all decisions, from watering to fertilizer to pest control and plant placement. You can use advice from other gardeners to guide you, but don't get so hung up on doing everything right that you lose the joy of gardening.

Part of the fun is experimenting to see what works and what fails. Every garden is unique and what works for that one homesteader on Youtube who grows incredible carrots might not work at all in your backyard.

Failures are not actually failures - they are lessons. You're going to learn something every time you try to grow something new. Think of your garden like a scientist. Brainstorm for experiments you can try.

For instance, the first time I planted cantaloupe, I direct sowed the seeds and I put them in way too early in the spring. The ground was still slightly frozen. When nothing came up, I chalked it up as failure and planted strawberries in the same spot. A month later, I had cantaloupe vines sprawling everywhere in the midst of strawberries. If I would have been patient and given my seeds a little more time (or started them indoors or when the weather was warmer), I wouldn't have wound up with a fruit salad disaster in that garden bed.

But I learned something from that little disaster and ultimately, I harvested a few cantaloupes and strawberries anyway so it worked out okay.

No matter what happens, don't panic. A garden gives you the merciful gift of a blank slate and a fresh start every spring. Learn the lesson and look for ways to do things differently next year. If you learned something, it was a fruitful gardening season. Period.

KEEP LEARNING!

Now that you've gone through the garden guide, it's time to get your hands in the dirt. The best lessons happen in the garden, not in a book or on a screen.

If you find yourself struggling this garden season, consider finding a garden friend to mentor you. If you can't find someone local, I offer garden coaching appointments virtually via zoom or FaceTime. You can get all the details at GraceWalkFarm.com.

Thanks for spending time with me in the garden! I hope this little guide will send you on your way to a blessed and abundant growing season. May God bless the seeds you sow and may He sow seeds of faith and peace in your heart as you garden.