

Our Super Garden®

Start Your Own Garden Checklist

Here are 10 steps to start your own garden. Be sure to get kids involved in the planning and preparation: Have them grab their notebooks, pencils, measuring tape, and a small shovel and head out to your future garden spot. Answer these questions and record your information.

1. **What is the size of your garden-to-be?** Will it be big enough to grow your chosen plants? Remember, all plants need space, some more than others.
2. **How much sun does this spot receive each day?** Most flowers and vegetables require six to eight hours of sun daily. Visit your plot several times during the day. Is it mostly in sun or shadow? If mostly in shadow, consider growing a garden of shade-loving plants or find a sunnier spot.
3. **How much water will the garden receive?** Check your plot after it rains. Do trees or overhanging roofs keep the ground dry? Or is the ground squishy with water? Gardens need about one inch of rain each week, but too much water will kill the plants. Sometimes you'll need to water the garden by hose. How far is the closest water spigot? Will your hose reach from there to the garden?
4. **What kind of soil will your plants grow in?** Dig some up and squish it in your hands. Is it hard and crumbly? Does water drip out when you squeeze it? Is it sandy? Is it damp and hold the shape of a ball? Plants need soft, moist soil full of nutrition to spread their roots and grow. If your soil is hard or sandy, you may want to add compost to it before you plant. Compost also adds nutrition to the soil.
5. **Is your plot easy to get to?** Can you easily push a wheelbarrow or carry your tools to it? Could you dump compost or mulch nearby? A good location makes the hard work a lot easier.
6. **What kind of fruits and vegetables do you want to grow?** Your local nursery and cooperative extension office can help you choose the best varieties to plant for your area. But where in the garden will you put them? Make a plan by charting your garden on paper. Consider growing a row for your local food bank!
7. **Is it safe to dig?** If you're planting directly in the ground (versus raised beds), contact your local underground utility location service (e.g., JULIE, MISS DIG) before turning over the soil. These services usually are free and well worth your safety! Once you get the all clear, turn over the soil eight to 12 inches deep, and remove any grass clumps or sticks. A great alternative to digging is using raised bed gardens that you fill with soil. You can make these with cedar wood (never use treated wood) or purchase a raised bed kit from your area garden center. Container gardens work great, too.

8. **How healthy is your soil?** If planting in the ground, it's always a good idea to get your soil tested. A test will tell you the soil's pH balance, what it's made of, and often give you suggestions for making it healthier and more productive. Urban soil should be tested for lead and other metals. Local cooperative extension offices often provide soil testing for a nominal fee or can direct you to companies that do. Remember to add compost to the soil. It's one of the best gifts you can give a garden.
9. **When will you plant and harvest?** Follow the instructions on your seed packets or seedling stakes to determine the best time to plant and harvest. You may want to mulch around plants (but not touch the plants) with grass clippings. This will help control weeds and eventually break down and feed the soil.
10. **How do we care for the garden?** Once you're garden's planted and mulched, the hardest work is done. Sit back and enjoy watching it grow. Water as needed, pull weeds, and keep an eye out for pests (a soap-spray solution is a sustainable - and preferable - alternative to pesticides). Record in your notebook the plants that are doing well and not so well, problems you have with pests and how you solved them, and the fruits and vegetables you enjoyed eating most.

Happy Growing! Remember, gardening is about learning. Sometimes plants grow, and sometimes they die, even for the most experienced gardeners. Experiment, be open to making mistakes, and learn along with your young gardeners. No "green thumbs" are required, just a passion for nature, healthy foods and sharing what can be a life-changing experience for a child.