

# THE BACKYARD FOOD STARTER GUIDE

A no-nonsense first plan for ordinary yards.

Start small. Build good soil. Grow food you actually eat.  
Make room for the life that helps you do it.

BE KIND. GROW YOUR OWN FOOD.

# 01 Decide what this garden is for.

The fastest way to make a garden expensive and exhausting is to start by buying things. Start with a reason instead.

## Ask four questions before you buy a seed:

- **What do we actually eat?** Grow the food that regularly comes into your kitchen, not the crops that look impressive online.
- **How much time do I really have?** A smaller garden you can care for beats a giant one you resent by July.
- **What problem am I trying to solve?** Fresh herbs? Grocery costs? Better tomatoes? A place for your kids to learn? Habitat? Pick a primary goal.
- **What can this space support?** Notice sun, shade, drainage, wind, access to water, and how you actually move through the yard.

### STARTER RULE

Do not build the garden you hope to have in five years. Build the garden you can care for this season. You can always make it bigger. You cannot reclaim a July weekend spent weeding twelve beds you never needed.

**Your first-season goal:** harvest something, learn something, and still want to garden next year.

### PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

#### MAKE THE FIRST SEASON SMALL ON PURPOSE

A good first garden can be one 4 x 8 bed, a few containers, or even a sunny strip along a fence. Pick 4 to 6 crops, not 24. Give each one enough room to teach you something. Spend money first on soil, compost, mulch, seeds or healthy transplants, and a watering setup you will actually use. Decorative extras can wait. If the garden still feels manageable in July, you built the right size.

## 02 Put food where the light is.

Vegetables cannot negotiate with physics. Before you obsess over soil mixes, raised beds, or seed catalogs, figure out where the sun actually lands.

**For most fruiting crops** - tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, beans - aim for roughly 6 to 8 hours of direct sun when possible.

**For leafy crops and herbs** - lettuce, kale, parsley, cilantro, chives - you can often get useful harvests with less sun, especially in hot weather.

**Watch the space for a day.** Check it in the morning, around noon, and again in late afternoon. A spot that feels bright may still be shaded for half the growing day by a fence, tree, or house.

### DO THIS BEFORE BUILDING

Set a few empty pots or cardboard boxes where you think the garden should go. Live with the layout for several days. Walk around it. Drag a hose to it. Imagine carrying compost there. The best location is not just sunny - it is usable.

**Water access matters.** A garden 150 feet from the hose will teach you exactly how motivated you are in August.

### PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

#### MAKE A THREE-DAY SUN MAP

Take one photo of the space around 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and early evening for three clear days. You will quickly see where the reliable sun lives. Put tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, and beans in the strongest light. Use the softer edges for lettuce, parsley, cilantro, scallions, and other crops that tolerate some shade. Recheck in midsummer: trees leaf out, the sun angle changes, and your own trellises can create new shade.

## 03 Start with soil, not fertilizer.

Plants are not vending machines. You do not insert fertilizer and receive vegetables. Healthy soil is a living system that stores water, cycles nutrients, and supports roots.

**If you already have decent soil:** disturb it as little as possible. Add compost on top, cover bare ground, and let roots and soil organisms do more of the work.

**If your soil is compacted, contaminated, or impossible to use:** containers or raised beds can be a smart first step. You do not earn extra gardening points for suffering.

**Mulch is one of the cheapest garden upgrades.** Straw, shredded leaves, or other suitable organic materials help reduce evaporation, moderate soil temperature, and protect the surface from pounding rain.

### A BETTER DEFAULT

When a plant looks unhappy, investigate before feeding it. Too much water, too little water, root damage, heat, transplant stress, pests, and disease can all look like a nutrient problem. Fertilizer cannot fix all of them.

**Think long-term:** feed the soil system, keep living roots in it when you can, and avoid treating every imperfection like an emergency.

### PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

#### READ THE SOIL BEFORE YOU TRY TO FIX IT

Grab a handful after watering. If it forms a slick, dense ribbon, you may have heavy clay. If it falls apart immediately and dries fast, it may be sandy. If water sits on the surface for hours, drainage or compaction deserves attention. Add compost from the top rather than endlessly tilling. If you suspect contamination, a strange pH, or a real nutrient problem, get a soil test through a reputable local lab or extension service before buying a shelf full of amendments.

## 04 Grow the easy wins first.

Your first garden does not need twenty-seven crops. Choose a small mix that gives you quick victories, reliable harvests, and a reason to keep checking the garden.

### Good starter crops:

- **Herbs:** basil, parsley, chives, thyme, mint in a container.
- **Fast crops:** radishes, lettuce, arugula, baby greens.
- **Reliable producers:** bush beans, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini where vine borers are not overwhelming.
- **Cool-season crops:** peas, kale, spinach, beets, carrots.

**Then add one crop purely because it makes you happy.** Gardens are allowed to be useful and joyful at the same time.

#### THE GROCERY-STORE TEST

Look at what you bought this week. Which herbs wilted in the refrigerator? Which produce is expensive? Which thing tastes dramatically better fresh? That list is often more useful than a seed catalog.

Plant fewer varieties, but plant enough of each to actually learn how they behave.

#### PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

### A SIMPLE FIRST-BED MIX

Think in jobs, not just varieties. Choose one or two long-season anchors such as a tomato or pepper, one vertical crop such as cucumbers or pole beans, one quick crop such as lettuce or radishes, and a few herbs or flowers along the edges. That mix gives you something fast, something productive, something that uses height, and something that supports the rest of the garden. The exact plants matter less than giving yourself different kinds of harvests.

## 05 Water deeply. Then pay attention.

Most new gardeners either love plants to death with water or forget they exist until the leaves file a formal complaint.

**Water the root zone, not the calendar.** Push a finger into the soil. Check moisture below the surface. A dry-looking top inch does not always mean the whole root zone is dry.

**Deep watering usually beats constant shallow watering.** It encourages roots to explore more soil and can make plants more resilient between waterings.

**Morning is a good default.** It reduces evaporation compared with midday and gives wet foliage time to dry when overhead watering is unavoidable.

**Containers dry faster.** Raised beds can dry faster too. Wind and heat change everything, so learn your specific space instead of following a rigid schedule.

### MAKE IT EASIER

If watering is annoying, fix the system. Move the hose. Add a splitter. Use drip irrigation. Mulch. Put containers together. Good garden design reduces the number of times you have to rely on willpower.

### PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

#### LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THIRSTY AND HOT

A plant that droops at 3 p.m. on a brutal summer day may simply be protecting itself. Check again near sunset and feel the soil before watering. If it recovers as temperatures fall and the root zone is still moist, more water may not be the answer. Seedlings and containers need closer attention because their roots have less reserve. Established plants generally benefit from slower, deeper watering that reaches the root zone instead of frequent splashes on the surface.

# 06 Stop treating every insect like an invasion.

A garden is not a sterile production line. If you want pollinators, birds, frogs, predatory insects, and healthier ecological balance, some bugs have to be allowed to exist.

**Identify first.** A caterpillar chewing one plant may be a future butterfly. A strange larva may be eating aphids. Do not spray first and Google later.

**Accept cosmetic damage.** A leaf with holes can still feed a plant. The goal is not zero insects. The goal is a garden that can tolerate life happening in it.

**Build habitat for helpers.** Flowers with different bloom times, water sources, leaf litter, stems, logs, and fewer chemicals can make the garden useful to predators and pollinators.

**Intervene when necessary, but start narrow.** Hand-picking, pruning a badly affected section, barriers, and crop-specific controls often create less collateral damage than broad spraying.

## REMEMBER

The same garden that attracts the insect eating your kale can also attract the insect that eats that insect. Ecological balance takes time. Give the system a chance to show up.

## PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

### THE FIVE-MINUTE PEST CHECK

Before doing anything, look at the top and underside of several leaves. Check stems, new growth, flowers, and the soil line. Look for eggs, frass, webbing, sticky residue, chewing patterns, and the insect itself. Then look for predators too: lady beetle larvae, lacewing larvae, spiders, wasps, birds, and other hunters. Take a photo before removing anything. A few minutes of observation can prevent you from destroying the very thing that was already solving the problem.

## 07 Your first 30 days.

You do not need a perfect master plan. You need enough structure to begin without turning the project into a second job.

### Week 1 - Observe.

Track sun. Choose the easiest water access. Measure your usable space. Write down five foods your household genuinely eats.

### Week 2 - Prepare.

Choose containers, one or two beds, or an existing patch. Add compost if needed. Gather mulch. Buy or start only the plants you have room to care for.

### Week 3 - Plant.

Plant according to your local season, water thoroughly, label what you planted, and take a photo. That photo will teach you more later than you think.

### Week 4 - Notice.

Check moisture. Look under leaves. Notice what is flowering and what insects are visiting. Harvest something small. Write down what you would change.

#### YOUR ONLY REAL ASSIGNMENT

Pay attention. Gardening is less about memorizing rules and more about becoming familiar with one place over time.

**Practice makes progress.** The garden will teach you what the internet cannot: your soil, your light, your weather, your pests, your timing, and your own capacity.

#### PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

#### KEEP A TINY GARDEN LOG

Once a week, write down four things: what you planted, what you harvested, what surprised you, and what you would change. Add one photo from roughly the same angle. By the end of the season you will know where shade arrived, which varieties earned their space, when pests showed up, and when harvests began. That information is more useful next year than trying to remember everything from January. Gardening gets easier when your own yard becomes the reference book.

## 08 Grow better together.

The harvest is useful. The relationship you build with your food, your soil, your neighbors, and the life sharing your yard may be even more valuable.

Share extra seedlings. Trade seeds. Give away the zucchini you swore you would eat. Ask an older gardener what grew there twenty years ago. Let your kids pull carrots too early. Leave a flower for the bees.

A backyard garden will not solve every problem in the food system. It does something quieter: it gives you a direct relationship with food again. Once you have that relationship, you start noticing the systems around it differently.

### KEEP GOING

Do not wait until you have more land, more money, more knowledge, or a perfect plan. Start with one pot, one bed, one patch of grass, one packet of seeds. Grow what you can. Learn what you cannot. Share both.

### Avellino Farms

Free garden education, practical resources, and a little rebellion growing between the fence posts.

### Be kind. Grow your own food.

This guide is general educational information. Local climate, soil, pests, regulations, and individual circumstances vary; use local extension resources when you need region-specific guidance.

### PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE

#### EXPAND ONLY AFTER THE SYSTEM WORKS

Before adding another bed next year, ask whether watering was easy, paths stayed usable, the harvest matched what your household eats, and the existing space was actually full. Improve the weak link before adding square footage. Save seed where appropriate, keep composting, leave useful habitat through winter, and make notes while the season is still fresh. More garden is not automatically more food. A well-run small garden usually beats a sprawling one that depends on constant rescue.