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GROWS



**Westmont Gardening Club
June 7, 2022**

Top 10 Tips For Starting Your Garden

1. Choose a location.

Starting a garden is just like real estate— it's all about location. Place your garden in a part of your yard where you'll see it regularly (out of sight, out of mind definitely applies to gardening). That way, you'll be much more likely to spend time in it.

2. Follow the sun.

Pay attention to how sunlight plays through your yard before choosing a spot for your garden. Most edible plants, including many vegetables, herbs, and fruits, need **at least 6 hours of sun** in order to thrive.

3. Stay close to water.

One of the best gardening tips you'll ever get is to plan your new garden near a water source. Make sure you can run a hose to your garden, so you don't have to lug water to it each time your plants get thirsty. The best way to tell if plants need watering is to push a finger an inch down into the soil (that's about one knuckle deep). If it's dry, it's time to water.

4. Start with great soil.

When starting a garden, one of the top pieces of advice is to invest in soil that is nutrient-rich and well-drained. Most commercial *potting soils* will be sufficient for this purpose.

5. Consider containers.

When space is at a premium, look to containers. You can grow many plants in pots, including vegetables, herbs, flowers, fruit trees, berries, and shrubs. When gardening in containers, use a pot that's large enough for the plant it's hosting.

6. Choose your plants.

It's important to select plants that match your growing conditions. This means putting sun-loving plants into a sunny spot, choosing heat-tolerant plants in warm climates, and giving ground-gobbling vines like pumpkins and melons ample elbow room (or a trellis to climb).

* The majority of this handout was originally found on the miraclegro.com website.

7. Discover your zone.

Knowing your "hardiness zone" can help you choose the best plants. The higher the zone number, the warmer the climate. So if a plant is "hardy to zone 4" and you garden in zone 5, that plant will survive in your yard. If, however, you're in zone 3, it's too cold to grow that particular plant. **Chicago is in Hardiness Zone 5.**

8. Learn your frost dates.

Planting too early (or late) in the season can spell disaster for your garden. You need to know the last average spring frost date for your area so you don't accidentally kill plants by putting them out prematurely. It's also good to know your first average fall frost date so that you get your plants harvested or moved indoors before late-season cold damages them. **Chicago's first frost date is 10/13 and its last frost date is 4/25.**

9. Add some mulch.

Apply a layer of mulch that's 2 to 3 inches deep around each plant. This will help reduce weeds by blocking out the sun, and reduce moisture loss through evaporation, so you have to water less. Or, you can put down straw, shredded leaves, pine straw, or some other locally available material.

10. Feed plants regularly.

We've already talked about the importance of starting with great soil, but that soil works best in concert with regular boosts of high-quality nutrition for your plants. In other words, amazing soil + top-notch plant food = super garden success! So, a month after planting, begin feeding your garden with plant food.

Gather The Tools You Will Need

Gloves

Every gardener should have a few pairs of nitrile-coated gloves. Nitrile offers excellent dexterity (you can even pick up seeds) and knit backs to keep hands cool—plus, they're machine washable. Nitriles aren't warm enough for cold-weather gardening, though, so you may also want to invest in a sturdy pair of lined waterproof work gloves.

Pruners

Sharp pruners are necessary for chores like clipping stems and harvesting vegetables. It's one tool you'll reach for again and again. In fact, many gardeners wear them on their belts to keep them close at hand. Invest in quality pruners that will last a lifetime.

Trowel

A trowel makes digging small holes a cinch. Look for a handle that fits your hand comfortably, and a high quality construction that features seamless metal solidly joined to the handle.

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Premium Quality Soil

The success of any garden hinges on quality soil.

Watering Gear

Select a watering can with a detachable "rose" (sprinkler head) and a large opening for filling up. You'll also want a high-quality hose so you aren't constantly battling kinks. Add an adjustable hose nozzle (with a gentle "shower" setting) with an ergonomic grip and you're primed for success.

Plant Food

Like us, plants need food to thrive.

Shovel

For a vegetable garden, you may want a traditional spade to help turn soil. Don't overlook specialized shovels, like a sharpshooter spading shovel (with a narrow blade for working in established beds and rocky soil) or a Kombi shovel (with a toothed blade ideal for digging in heavy clay) if your garden calls for it. As with any long-handled tool, make sure it is the right heaviness and height for your body type.

Garden Fork

Also known as a digging fork, this handy tool is what you grab for turning soil in new or existing beds, including breaking up clods and sifting out stones. It's also a great garden tool for turning compost. In raised beds, use a digging fork to loosen and aerate soil prior to planting.

Rake & Hoe

In large vegetable gardens, a standard bow rake comes in handy for working soil and smoothing out beds prior to planting. A hoe is a go-to tool for weeding and working soil, especially in vegetable gardens.

Wheelbarrow

Every gardener needs a wheelbarrow, heavy-duty wagon, or garden cart to help haul plants, garden tools, and bulk materials (think soil, compost, mulch, etc.) around the yard. Invest in a higher grade construction-type wheelbarrow with a strong bucket so you'll be able to use it for years to come.

It's easy to go overboard with garden tools and stock your shed with an abundance of items you rarely use. To avoid that, stick with the list above, adding just two final items that you'll use again and again: **Buckets** (you can never have enough) and **a comfortable hat**. When choosing a hat, go for one that has a vented crown to let your head breathe, a wide brim to block the sun, and a beaded string you can tighten on windy days. Now, nothing can stop you from having a blast this growing season, and many more to come!

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