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Photo by Kit Latham; illustrations by Ian Dingman

Dirt Cheap Eats

By Barbara Damrosch, March & April 2009

Enjoy fresh food, fresh air, and a fatter wallet by growing your own vegetables

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It is a warm summer afternoon in Louisiana, circa 1950, and my grandparents are shelling peas in the shade of the pecan trees in their yard. My mother joins in, and soon the circle includes aunts, neighbors, me, and my sisters—little city kids from up north. This is how we do our "visiting."

My grandmother will make her tomato relish, and my grandfather will carry in a watermelon for dessert.

I am lucky to have memories of a time when the garden was the center of everyday life. It may be why I am a vegetable farmer today—albeit in chilly Maine, not the balmy South—and why I am compelled to share my passion for food, and how to grow it, with others.

A few generations ago the kitchen garden was a necessity. In recent times it has become more of a hobby, a source of fun and outdoor exercise that carries a few bonuses. No salad is fresher than the one you pick minutes before a meal; no dish gives more pride than the one you produce literally from the ground up. Today, with the economy sputtering, we may see the kitchen garden make a comeback. Remember victory gardens? Eleanor Roosevelt spurred 20 million home gardens by planting one on the White House grounds in 1943. A Maine neighbor's petition drive at eattheview.org asks the Obamas to renew the example. All you need to start your kitchen garden is a bit of basic information about plot size and soil, guarding your garden from wildlife, and which crops to grow.

How Big a Garden?

While a piece of ground about 30 feet by 30 feet can provide enough vegetables to feed at least one person for a year, and many yards have a sunny spot that big, it's best for a beginner to start small. A plot 12 feet square can support quite a bit of food if you follow early crops with late ones. And after a rookie season, you can consider a bigger plot. You have nothing to lose but your lawn and the endless job of mowing it.

How much money you'll save by growing your own food depends on your soil, climate, and weather. But here's some encouraging math: it is not unreasonable to expect ten pounds of tomatoes from one well-grown plant. If you grow three plants, and organic tomatoes sell for \$3.50 a pound, that's a \$105 value. Crops that bear over a long time, such as Swiss chard and pole beans, are especially economical. When early carrots and scallions have all been eaten, you can sow kale in their place. Indeed, you could grow as much as \$500 worth of produce from the small plot described here—and have a great time doing it.

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It's All About the Soil

The very best garden investment is a healthy, fertile soil that's the consistency of crumbly chocolate cake. It should be alive with worms, plant-nourishing bacteria, and other tiny microbes that help crops grow. You create soil like that by adding plenty of organic matter; the best and cheapest source is your own compost pile of dried leaves, grass clippings, and vegetable scraps from the kitchen. Letting it all break down into nature's "black gold" takes time, though. To get your garden started, you'll probably need to buy some organic matter to improve fertility.

As soon as the soil is no longer soggy, till under any sod and incorporate a complete organic fertilizer (\$5), two 40-pound bags of compost or manure (\$15), and, if your soil is acidic, as most tend to be in moist climates, a bit of lime (\$3 a bag). Get a simple soil test done through your state's cooperative extension service, or buy one at your garden center. If hand-tilling is too much effort, pay a landscaper a one-time fee to rototill the plot. Keep your beds soft and fluffy by not walking on them. In future years, if you keep the beds weeded, you can fork in compost shallowly and never have to till again.

Fence Out Critters

Most gardens need protection against predators such as rabbits, groundhogs, and pets. A good fence is a better investment than repellents or scare devices, whose effectiveness wears off in time. The simplest fence is one with metal stakes supporting wire mesh. The gate can be mesh with a wooden frame. Make the fence six feet tall to keep out deer, and use a finer mesh at the bottom to deter rabbits, extending it below ground level to stop burrowers. Total cost: \$150.

Make Your Menu

What should you grow? Start with what you love to eat. About \$50 worth of seed packets will get you started. Since you won't need all the seeds in the packets, and most stay fresh for at least three years, the yearly cost is about \$16. In any garden, tall plants such as pole beans should go on the north side, to avoid shading the others.

Most vegetables are annuals, planted anew each year, but I tuck in a few alpine strawberries, too. These tiny, exquisite plants bear fruit all season and remain in place from year to year, to our grandchildren's delight. They head for the strawberry row the minute their parents pull up in the driveway. Our sugar snap peas and cherry tomatoes are also kid magnets, and I like to think our small foragers are gleaming far more than a healthful snack. They're learning that growing food brings joy, and that dividend is priceless.

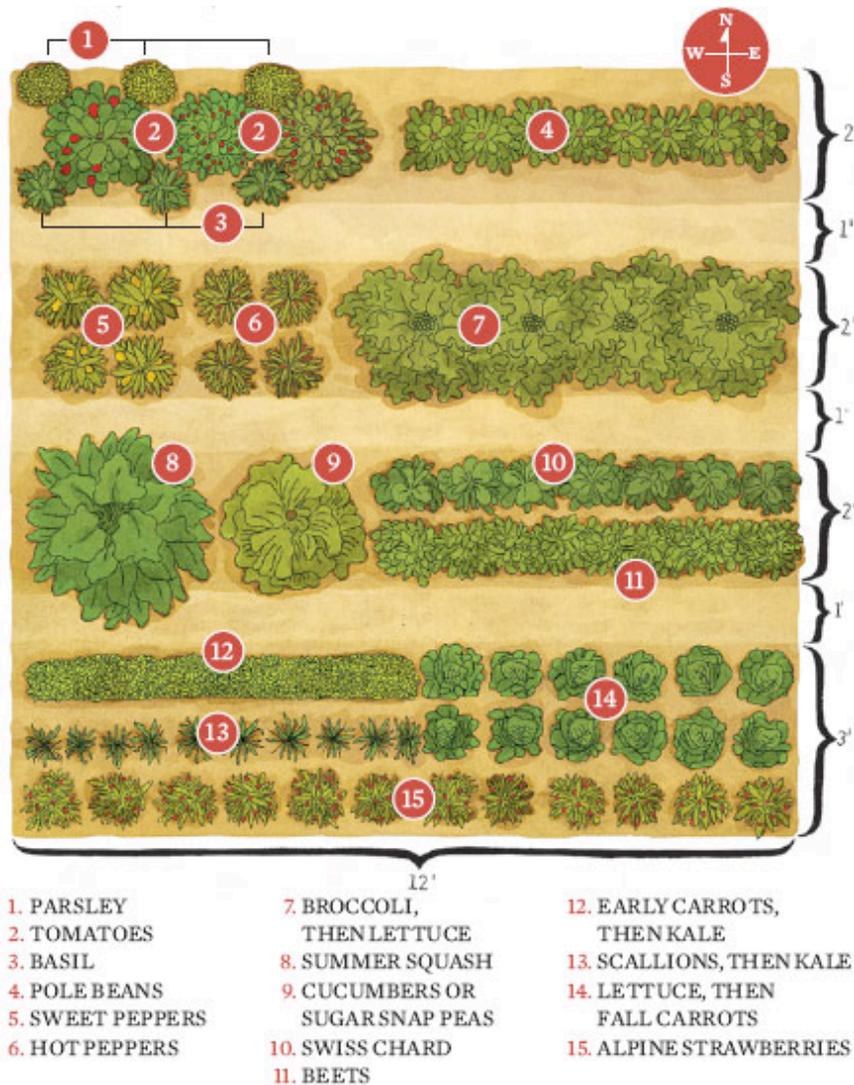
Barbara Damrosch writes a weekly column, [A Cook's Garden](#), in The Washington Post. An updated edition of her classic reference work, [The Garden Primer](#), was published by Workman last year.

For black-and-white reprints of this article call 866-888-3723.



Your Starter Garden

Here is the plot as it might appear two months after spring planting. The key below mentions late crops such as lettuce and kale that you can plant in summer for a second harvest.



Easy Vegetables to Grow

Let your tastebuds be your guide



Alpine strawberries

A perennial, everbearing type. Sow seeds indoors in early spring. Move the plants into the garden when they are large enough to handle, spacing them 12 inches apart.



Basil

This herb lasts until frost if you keep cutting the tips so it doesn't flower too much (leave some blooms for the bees). Tuck these outside the tomato cages.



Beets

A bed of beets will give you greens all season, plus baby beets in early summer and large beets later. Grow them 3 inches apart in the row, or sow 1 inch apart and thin gradually.



Broccoli

Look for varieties with good side-shoot production. They'll continue to bear once the central head has been harvested. Close planting (12 inches apart) also favors side shoots.



Carrots

Sow in stone-free soil. Harvest throughout the summer, fall, and even winter. Grow both early and late crops, spacing rows 6 inches apart and plants 2 inches apart.



Cucumbers

A few plants are enough. Even one will provide plenty for salads and sandwiches. Either trellis the plants, 12 inches apart, or let them sprawl, allowing 4 to 6 square feet per plant.



Lettuce

Grow three crops, in spring, summer, and fall. In hot weather grow a resilient variety such as Jericho. Plant regular heads 12 inches apart; miniheads, 8 to 10 inches apart.



Onions

Planting onion sets (dime-size onions) in spring is easy. Just poke them into the ground, 4 inches apart. After harvest, onions can be stored at room temperature.



Parsley

From a spring sowing, you can cut this herb all summer, fall, and even into winter. Tuck in a few plants outside the tomato cages.



Peppers

Nutritious to eat, but expensive to buy at your grocer. Grow some hot, some sweet, planting them 12 to 18 inches apart. Peppers need warmth even more than tomatoes do.



Pole beans

These beans bear over a long season. On trellises, grow plants 6 inches apart. For single poles, set poles 18 inches apart, sowing 6 seeds at the base of each and thinning to 3.



Salad mix

Seeds may include lettuces and greens such as arugula and mizuna. Sow them thickly and harvest often, cutting close to the ground whenever leaves reach 3 inches tall.



Scallions

These nonbulbing onions produce abundantly from seeds sown ½ inch apart. Or plant onion sets 2 inches apart and harvest every other one at scallion size.



Sugar snap peas

These are very high-yielding peas that you eat pod and all. Grow them on a trellis (or on a twiggly branch staked in the ground) with plants 3 to 4 inches apart.



Summer squash

One or 2 plants are all you need if you pick every day or so to keep them coming. Allow about 9 square feet for the plant to sprawl.



Swiss chard

One of the few greens that bears all summer long, and on into fall. Grow plants 10 inches apart, or sow more thickly and eat what you thin, as with beets.



Tomatoes

Just 2 plants will keep you in salads: 1 beefsteak and 1 cherry tomato. Add a paste tomato for making sauce. Plant them 2 to 3 feet apart. Use cages for support.



Tuscan kale

You have to try this deep-blue-green kale to know how tender and delicious it is. Harvest all summer and fall. Space plants 12 inches apart in rows.

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