

Gardening: More than a Solo Activity



The pandemic continues to affect everyday life despite lockdown protocols being lifted, and I've spent a lot more time in the garden because it's currently one of the few

things I can control (albeit barely!). For more than a decade, I've continued to make mistakes and discover tiny miracles in my outdoor oasis. It's almost always been a solo activity for me. I am physically alone when I garden, but that's hardly a good description of what gardening is to me. It's much more than a thing I do by myself. On quiet mornings when the only friends I have around are the birds and rabbits, I am thinking about all the gardeners I've encountered and conversed with.

I think about the gardener who just came up with an ingenious idea to block squirrels from digging up his beds. I think about the gardener who just had her first child—a child who will no doubt dig in the dirt at some point. I think about the friend who is moving soon to a new home with a small outdoor garden space, and I'm so thrilled to see it bloom. I think about the people who aren't even gardeners yet but who may well one day become part of the green-thumbed community. I think about the people who grow and supply most of the food I eat, the local farmers, the migrant workers—and everyone else who works to bring food to people's plates. I think of the people who don't even call themselves gardeners but who have more knowledge than I'll ever glean from my pitiful forays into the world of dirt and greenery. They are all with me when I'm plucking suckers from tomatoes and grumbling about flea beetles on my radishes.

This morning as I watered my garden, I thought about the recent protests happening across America (and even a few in Canada—Toronto, Montreal). As a white person, I cannot fathom the lived experience of a black person, but I can be an ally. So today, instead of writing about something gardening related, I'd like to amplify the voices of black gardeners and point you in the direction of people to follow, learn from, and get to know. People I'll think about, too, when I'm alone in the garden, but not really alone at all. People we should listen to, hear out, and hold up not just now when they are screaming in agony for someone to listen, for something to

change but always.

It's not enough to be against racism. We must be actively anti-racist.

#blacklivesmatter

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5 Easy and Neat Seed Storage Ideas



via [flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/seedstorage/10000000000/)

I'm an organization nerd (and a seed storage geek). It's why I'm so attracted to [Square Foot Gardening](https://www.squarefootgardening.com/). I like it when things have their place. Without a system, things easily start to become messy and confusing. "Where did I put that again?", "What did I just plant there last week?". I'm more forgetful than I like to be, so keeping everything in order, making notes, and marking planting areas allows me to clear my head of the details and focus on what's important.

Over the years, I've experimented with a number of seed storage ideas from tiny vials to lab storage equipment. Here are my favorite seed storage options:

Arts & Crafts Storage Box



This is my current seed storage method because, at this point, I have too many seeds for any other option to be viable. The large box contains several small containers, which are labeled by seed variety (carrots, squash, flowers, herbs, etc.). There's also enough room inside the storage case for me to stick two sharpies, a roll of string, and a handful of plant markers.

It's a sizeable box, but with its handle, it's ultra-transportable, and I tote it out to the garden almost every morning at the height of the gardening season.

Tiny Vials



via [flickr](#)

When I started gardening, I had a very small collection of seeds and lots of time on my hands. I purchased a bunch of tiny vials at the dollar store and filled them full of seed from packets I had found at the hardware store. Carefully pouring in the seeds was time-consuming yet relaxing work. When I was done, I had cute little seed-filled bottles on my hands. Seeds were easy to shake out and I could keep them on display and within reach.

Filing Container

I purchased my little black filing container from a local office supply store for under \$10 and still use it to this day. Because my seed collection has expanded considerably, it's now the spot where I store [empty seed packets](#) since I like to have those on hand for future reference. You can find something similar on [Amazon](#) or most big box office supply stores.

Tiny Lab Sample Containers

When my collection started to outgrow the vials, I decided on a new storage solution: [lab equipment](#). The tiny circular containers were perfect for storing seed (except big ones like squash and cucumber seed). Instead of labeling each container, I coded them with numbers and letters and created a spreadsheet to keep track of the seed type and date purchased. It was a big undertaking, but the system was incredibly useful, and I used this type of storage for years.

Tiny Resealable Bags

I use little [plastic bags](#) to store seeds destined for other people. They're perfect for swapping or sharing seeds. The small packets are lightweight, watertight, and easy to label. I prefer the clear plastic because I and others can easily see what's inside. These little packages are excellent for storing saved seeds, too.

Don't forget to check out my previous post that covers [handy seed storage tips](#).

Keep the Garden Well-Watered: 5 Tried & True Tools



Years ago, when, with the help of my dad, I started my first vegetable garden, I was vaguely aware of the importance of watering plants. I watered whenever I felt like it, and whenever it seemed like my plants yearned for moisture—it turns out many of the symptoms of [overwatering](#) and under watering are shockingly similar. I struggled to keep the garden well-watered.

Watering Epiphany

One of the main reasons for my irregular watering schedule was that my garden was tucked away in the depths of the yard, and getting there meant trekking out with shoes and lugging the heavy hose to where it was needed. It was an ordeal. When I moved out of my parent's home and created a garden plot of my own, I watered here and there but didn't start really soaking my plants until a year into things. I quickly realized that my haphazard watering wasn't going to cut it in this new patch of dirt. The spot, blessed with sun, dried out a whole lot quicker than in my very shaded garden of yesteryear.

Tried and True Watering Tools

I've spent a couple of years fiddling with water implements and figuring out the best solution for my little garden. Here's what I've found works for me.

Keep your garden well-watered with these must-have supplies.

Expandable hose

They're typically cheaper than a traditional chunky, cumbersome hose and are easy to carry around the garden. At the end of the season, it's super easy to pack up the flexible hose and toss it into the bin of supplies that will head to the basement for the winter. The drawback is that flexible hoses are less durable, but if you're careful and take good care of your watering implement, it should last a few seasons. There are also plenty of high-quality flexi-hoses with triple-layer protection, though they typically cost more. Buy one with a sprayer attachment that features multiple settings. Use the misting setting on tender [seedlings](#) and the soaker setting to water plants deeply from below.

Watering can

I use a super durable plastic watering can. It's been around for years and hasn't failed me yet. It's helpful for watering areas where the hose doesn't reach and for watering when the water is shut for the winter.

Mulch

[Mulch](#) won't provide your crops with water, but it conserves moisture exceptionally well. Without mulch, my topsoil dries up super quickly—even if I water at regular intervals. There are plenty of cheap and free mulch options, including grass clipping, leaf mold, and shredded cardboard or newspaper. My preference is straw, but it's not always readily available.

Soaker hose

I tried a fancy irrigation set up in my raised beds years ago, and it was an utter failure. The hoses got in the way of my footpaths, and it was more trouble than it was worth. That doesn't mean I completely gave up on irrigation. I recently installed soaker hoses in some of my ground-level beds, where I plan to plant [perennials](#) and other easy-to-maintain plants. Currently, only the hardiest of plants survive there because of the lack of water. The roof overhang blocks the rain and getting the hose there is a pain in the butt, so I use soaker hoses to water the area.

The weather forecast

Overwatering can be as problematic as under-watering, so while you must give thirsty plants sustenance, it's also wise to check the weather forecast before dumping a whole gallon of water into your beds. Don't waste this precious resource if it's looking like a rainstorm is on the way. Unless your plants are begging for water, it can wait.

*Do you have any favorite watering tools? How do you keep your garden well-watered? Are you fond of any watering tricks that have netted you lush, bushy plants year after year? I'd love to hear your water-wise tips! **Share them with me in the comments.***

Are Compost Bins Worth the Money?



Compost is an excellent amendment for your garden, and making your own is reasonably straightforward and cheap. Is it worth investing in a bin, though? Are compost bins worth the money?

Let's take a look at the cost of a traditional compost bin and the benefits of buying a pre-built container.

Cost of a compost bin

To find out whether compost bins are worth the money, we must understand the cost of the average model.

Storebought bins range in price but on average cost about \$100. The larger and more complex the bin, the higher the price tag. Tumbler-style bins tend to cost a bit more than freestanding plastic options.

Indoor compost systems designed to break down food mechanically are cost-prohibitive, and the technology still has a long way to go.

There are, however, plenty of simple, inexpensive bin designs available on the market.

Benefits of a store-bought compost bin

Why bother purchasing a bin? Here are a few pros:

- **Ready to go.** Store-bought compost bins are ready to use right out of the box, often with little assembly required. They're great for gardeners with minimal DIY experience.
- **Great for beginners.** If you're totally new to composting, buying a bin is an excellent way to get started. Many bins also come with handy instructions.
- **Pays for itself.** If you use it correctly, your bin will pay for itself over time. You won't need to buy bags of compost when the time comes to amend your soil.

Buying a compost bin isn't worth it, however, if you expect to move in the near future since most bins are not easily portable.

DIY compost bin ideas

Frugal gardeners who prefer not to spend too much cash at once can create DIY compost bins from found, recycled, or inexpensive materials. You don't need much to make your very own compost container. Here are a few ideas for building your own bin from scratch:

[Worm compost bin](#)

I wrote a post a little while ago about how to create an easy DIY worm compost bin.

[Cinderblock compost bin](#)

Have leftover cinder blocks from long past outdoor projects? Use them to build a sturdy compost bin.

[Wire compost bin](#)

This innovative, easy to build compost bin idea requires minimal tools and materials and keeps all your green and brown waste in one tidy spot.

[Milkcrate compost bin](#)

Check out this creative idea for repurposing milk crates into a super simple and effective compost bin.

[Leftover pallet compost bin](#)

Don't let leftover pallets go to waste. Use them to create a DIY compost bin. Instead of tossing those old pallets to the side of the road, recycle them into a garden project.

DIY Tumbler Compost Bin

Hardening Off Plants
Headache-Free



Hardening off plants is one of my least favorite gardening tasks. It requires a lot of care and attention, and it's really easy to mess it up. I've yet to perfect the shuffle that involves bringing trays of seedling outside then back in. There's always something that goes wrong. So let me help you avoid mistakes of your own by sharing all of mine, past, and present.

What is hardening off?

Hardening off plants involves [acclimating](#) your indoor-grown seedlings to the outdoor climate and conditions. Inside your house, your baby plants are given plenty of tender, love, and care. If you don't take the time to harden off your [seedlings](#) here's what can happen:

- Seedlings die because it's too cold.
- Seedlings experience leaf burn because the sun is a whole lot stronger than any indoor lights your plant has previously been exposed to.

- Seedlings die or become sickly because of transplant shock.
- Seedlings topple over and stems break because it's windy.

How do I harden off my seedlings?

First, you should have an idea of when it's appropriate to transplant your seedlings. Peppers and [eggplants](#) won't be heading outside anytime soon in my climate because it's still way too cold at night.

Hardening off plants involves exposing them, little by little to outdoor temperatures, and, of course, the strong rays of the sun. In my experience, it takes a little over a week to complete the process because not every day looks the same weather-wise. Today, for instance, I didn't bother putting my transplants outside for their second day of hardening off because the weather is stormy. I didn't want to risk harming my tender starts.

Here's a handy guide for hardening off seedlings

- Day 1: Set out in the shade for 1-2 hours. Make sure the plants aren't exposed to direct sunlight on their first day out in the wild.
- Day 2: Increase outdoor plant time slightly, keeping them in shade.
- Day 3: Increase time outdoors again with a little bit of time in the sun—make sure they're not exposed to the sun at the hottest part of the day. They're still not ready for that.
- Day 4 and 5: Increase time outside in shade and sun incrementally.
- Day 6 to 7: Keep plants outside almost all day but bring them in at night.

Once that week of hardening off is complete, it's time to transplant your starts in the garden.

Errors to Avoid

There's a lot of juggling around when hardening off plants. Set yourself a timer, so you don't forget to bring plants inside, especially in the first few days. It's easy to accidentally leave a tray of seedlings out in the hot afternoon sun and oops! You have a tray of burned plants on your hands.

Don't forget to water your plants! And if it rains, watch that your plants don't stay sitting in a puddle of water all day. Drain the trays accordingly.

Check the forecast, too. You don't need to stick to a strict hardening off schedule. Adjust if you need to. Will it be unexpectedly chilly tomorrow? Don't set out heat-loving starts until a day later when the warmth has returned.

Is Double Digging Worth It? Let's Find Out!



Double digging is often touted as a cost-free way to improve the condition of your [soil](#). But is double-digging worth it? While it doesn't require any monetary investment, this garden practice necessitates plenty of manual effort. Not every gardener has the strength to put into double digging. Is it double digging worth it? Should you invest a ton of energy into this method? Let's find out.

The advantages of double digging

Double digging, also sometimes described as tilling, has quite a few vehement opposers. This gardening method, however, does have a few clear advantages, including:

It loosens the soil. Loosening the soil has its benefits and drawbacks. Compacted soil is undesirable, after all. Amending and digging the topsoil helps to [aerate](#) the earth and increase nutrient content within that first layer.

It's an excellent method for starting a garden. Often, double digging is the primary method used when establishing a new

garden plot. It's an effective way to turn a swath of grass lawn into a productive garden.

It's quick. It's a quick way to achieve results as opposed to no-till gardening, which requires patience to improve soil quality. That said, quick solutions don't necessarily lead to positive outcomes in the long-term.

Here are some of [Amazon's Choice](#) for the best double digging tools.

The disadvantages of double digging

While tilling is often used interchangeably with the term double digging, some advocates for double dig gardening [argue](#) that the two are not quite the same. While tilling involves disrupting deep layers of soil and overall soil structure, double digging typically only affects the top-most layer of soil. Still, many gardeners prefer a no-dig approach to gardening, which helps maintain soil health. There are a few other notable disadvantages to digging up a bed in this way:

It brings up weeds. Double digging causes weed seeds that were too deep to germinate to come up to the surface.

It disrupts soil structure. Deep digging can, quite literally, turn soil structure upside down. This, in turn, leads to further issues with compaction down the road. Healthy soil is less likely to become compacted and is more capable of retaining moisture.

How to avoid soil compaction

Compacted soil is one of the top reasons gardeners till and double dig the soil. Doing so loosens up the earth and creates

(albeit often temporary) improved soil conditions for planting. Here's how to avoid compaction in the first place:

Never step or walk on garden soil. Create paths around your [garden beds](#) to ensure easy access that doesn't require trampling all over the earth.

Don't till when the soil is wet. This further [damages](#) the structure of the soil and encourages further compaction.

Limit tilling and double digging. Excess tilling and digging might temporarily loosen up your soil, but over time it's likely to have the opposite effect.

An alternative: no-dig gardening

If you're interested in trying out a no-till gardening method, check out this YouTube video explainer on lasagna gardening, which is a low-cost alternative to the double dig method.

5 Ways to Banish Weeds Without Breaking the Bank



I've got a little bit more work to do than usual this spring because of the mistakes I made when installing my raised beds five years ago. I was eager to get started and didn't think I'd have issues with weeds since my beds were waist-high. I assumed I'd have to deal with the occasional weed, but in my haste, I never thought about what the roots of nearby cedars might do to my precious growing space. My initial error meant I needed to come up with cheap ways to banish weeds.

Dealing with Weeds in my Garden

Fast-forward to last season, when I dealt with nutrient deficiencies. I was left scratching my head. What was going on? Why was my soil quality so poor? I spent plenty of time amending the soil each season and made sure to add compost and never over-fertilize. What was I doing wrong? Why was one bed more affected than another? It turns out the cedar hedge roots that border my garden were infiltrating one of my garden beds (the one closest to the hedges). I needed to find a quick solution to a problem that would only get worse over time.

First, we trimmed back the hedges significantly, and then I got to work devising a plan to create a whole new layer of healthy soil. Last fall, my husband helped me cover the existing earth with leftover garden stones (cracked and broken and no longer of use in the yard). We layered stones, dead leaves, and cardboard, leaving a few inches that would need to be filled with soil mix in the spring. These past few weeks, I've slowly been topping up the raised beds with soil and compost. Here's hoping I don't encounter any issues this season! I trust I've rectified my mistake.

Don't make the same error! Banish weeds and tree roots with the following tips:

Use Elevated Planters or Containers

Are you worried about tree roots getting into your raised planters? Don't set them right on the ground. Build elevated, table-top planters or use movable [containers](#) to grow edibles and ornamentals.

Put Down Cardboard

Cardboard will eventually break down, but it's a useful tool for [blocking out pesky weeds](#) like dandelions that seem to pop back up each year without a care in the world.

Use the SFG Method

If you're looking for a planting method that limits weeds, try the square foot gardening method. The close spacing between plants acts as a kind of mulching mechanism to block out weed growth. It's also super easy to spot weeds in an SFG plot because the invader is clearly the odd one out.

Mulch, Mulch, Mulch

Mulch with wood chips, [coco coir](#), straw, leaf mold, or

shredded paper to conserve moisture and eliminate weed growth around your plants. Careful, don't mulch too much. Too-thick a layer of mulch can suffocate plant roots in addition to weeds.

Lay Down Newspaper

Don't have cardboard boxes lying around and need a cheap, easily accessible alternative? Use shredded newspaper as mulch or sheets of newspaper to block out weeds when starting a new garden bed.

5 Free Garden Marker Ideas to Keep Track of Plants



Why should you consider these free garden marker ideas? I

don't care how great your memory is, find a way to [label](#) all of your seedlings and transplanted crops—knowing what you've planted (and where) is equally important when you're direct-sowing. If you forget to label the spot where you've just sown seeds, you might accidentally sow again in the same area. It's a waste of time and seed. You might also mistake seedlings for [weeds](#). An experienced gardener can usually tell the difference, but if you're new to the hobby, you might end up pulling up precious starts thinking they're garden invaders.

Labeling plants doesn't have to be a difficult or costly ordeal. There are plenty of ways to label plants without spending a penny. Here are five free garden marker ideas for your outdoor oasis.

Free Garden Marker Ideas

Popsicle sticks

These are ultra-cheap, and you've likely got some stowed away in a cupboard somewhere. If you're not an artsy type and don't have a craft cupboard, try saving leftover popsicle sticks after devouring summer treats. All you need is a permanent marker to label each stick.

Masking tape

I use this for indoor plants and seedlings when I've run out of the standard plastic plant markers. Just be careful not to get masking tape wet.

Stones

I don't suggest creating permanent garden markers that cannot be moved. Markers should be easy to transfer to different areas of the garden. It's best to rotate crops (even in a small garden!) and avoid planting them in the same spot year after year. Get creative and paint stones to mark your garden crops. They're incredibly durable (duh!), and you can have fun

with designing them. If you don't have stones nearby, you can [order a set on Amazon](#) and get them delivered for free to your home.

Recycled bottles

Have a bunch of leftover wine bottles? Don't toss them in the recycling bin! [Use them in the garden](#). Fill them with water and pop them next to thirsty plants or paint and label them to keep track of what you're growing where.

Seed packets

Laminate and mount empty [seed packets](#) on wooden or metal sticks and enjoy a garden marker that contains all of the reference info you need to grow a particular plant.

Fall Cleanup

Even the most durable garden markers (e.g., stones) shouldn't be left in the garden over the winter. Remember to bring everything in at the end of the season. Store your garden markers away from the harsh elements to keep them in tip-top shape year after year.

Need more ideas? Check out this video that contains a slew of ideas for creating garden markers for your outdoor growing space.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMTLvRsmEZc>

Victory Garden Planning during a Pandemic



We're in the thick of it now. Areas are going into lockdown, and non-essential businesses are closing until further notice. It feels weird. It's scary. I'm exhausted. But I feel motivated, now more than ever, to keep up my gardening efforts. I've seen interest in [gardening](#) skyrocket. Is this the return of the victory garden?

I know a lot of you are anxious to get started and make up for lost time. While it's a little late to start crops like onions, there's still plenty of time to prep before the last frost date passes you by.

Starting Seeds

Last year, I wrote a series of posts about seed starting. The posts covered a lot of ground, so I recommend checking out a few of those articles. Many of them go over the many mistakes

you can make during the process and provide tips for avoiding fatal errors. Here's a roundup of a few posts you should read:

[Seed starting Mistakes to Avoid](#)

[Is Starting from Seed Worth it?](#)

[The Importance of Air Circulation](#)

[Seed Germination](#)

[Watering Seedlings](#)

Now is a great time to consider starting your victory garden [plants from seed](#). Why? With many stores shutting their physical locations, you'll likely have a tough time finding starts. Don't hesitate to contact your local nursery, though. Many locations are offering delivery for all sorts of items.

What Should I Grow in my Victory Garden?

I get this question a lot. Whether you have a ton of space or a small balcony, the answer is two-fold:

Things you like to eat

If vegetable gardening is your goal, think about what pops up often on your dinner plate. Don't bother with things that are easy if they don't appeal to your palate.

I love greens and eat a lot of kale, arugula, and bok choy, so those are some of the crops that feature prominently in my garden.

Conversely, I don't love cucumbers that much and rarely sacrifice a lot of growing space to them. One plant is more than enough and, I usually only use them for pickling. Some years, I don't bother with cukes at all.

Things that are easy

Unless you're an avid gardener or don't mind dealing with finicky crops, stick to things that are easy to grow. Remember, though, easy is relative. Something that's easy to grow in one climate may be a pain to grow in another. Or perhaps it's tougher to produce a particular crop in your area because of a recurring pest issue. I don't bother with corn anymore, because squirrels always make off with the goods when I'm not looking.

Your best bet is to pick plants that meet somewhere in the middle. The best plants for your victory garden are those that provide a significant reward compared to the effort expended. For instance, I love love, love, eggplants. They're a bit tricky to grow in my climate, because they prefer hot weather and don't enjoy temperature swings (which are common here, especially at the start and end of the summer). Still, I love them so much I'm willing to deal with these delicate plants. On the plus side, I never have pest issues with my eggplants. The result? A plant that provides a big reward upon harvest (because I love eating eggplant!) but doesn't require an unreasonable amount of effort to grow.

Profitable Greenhouse Crops: Money in Your Pockets



You've been growing for a while. You've built a DIY [greenhouse](#) (or [invested in one](#)) and decided that you want to turn your hobby into a profitable small business. Which plants should you focus on growing to ensure steady cash flow? Here are the most profitable greenhouse crops that you should consider growing:

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are the star of the garden world, and they thrive in greenhouse conditions. People love [tomatoes](#)! Choose specialty varieties, like heirloom strains, to offer unique selections to your customers. Pick indeterminate varieties for a continuous yield. No farmer's market stand is quite right without tomatoes, after all.

Leafy greens

Lettuce, [kale](#), chard, spinach are highly sought after produce items. There are also plenty of specialty varieties that can be marketed as gourmet. Leafy greens are easy to grow and

harvest. They also mature quicker than many other types of produce. Spinach, for instance, takes less than a month before it's ready to harvest. People don't mind paying a premium for fancy, flavorful lettuce mixes.

Rhubarb and Swiss Chard both great options that have edible leafy red stalks, and you can use this free comprehensive guide on how to [harvest rhubarb](#).

Herbs

Basil, cilantro, sage, rosemary. These are all popular with both chefs and home cooks. Most herb plants offer multiple harvests and require minimal space. You can grow them alongside other high-yield crops, as well. If you have an overflow of herbs, it's also possible to dehydrate them and sell dried, packaged herbs to customers.

Microgreens

Microgreens are a super-profitable greenhouse crop. They're also incredibly easy to grow and provide a hefty return. You don't even need a greenhouse to get started with growing microgreens, but a dedicated space is definitely an advantage. It takes less than a month to grow a tray of microgreens so you can harvest A LOT during a season. They also fetch a high price per pound. People love them because they're tasty and nutritious. The drawback of this crop, though, is the short shelf life.

Things to consider before jumping right in

Of course, starting a hobby farm business and selling profitable greenhouse crops is a bit more complicated than selecting high-value plants. **You can't sell produce without a**

buyer. Who will buy your plants? Will you sell directly to a local restaurant? Or do you plan to set up at a farmer's market? Considering demand is vital. Don't choose what to grow before you fully understand what your buyer wants. If your goal is to sell to a local restaurateur, have a chat and ask about what they might need then plant accordingly.

Think also about **how long individual plants take to mature.** Tomatoes are popular at farmer's markets, but they also require a long growing season and take up a significant amount of space. Does it make sense to focus on this crop if you have a tiny greenhouse space? Or should you focus on [quick-growing](#) plants that will yield multiple harvests and provide more opportunities for income?

Don't forget to factor in the effort required to grow plants. Certain types of produce require a lot more effort to grow than others. Many greens, for instance, don't require a lot of babysitting, but eggplants and tomatoes need a lot more TLC.