Why Prepping in Advance is so Important for the Frugal Gardener

I spent a significant chunk of my Friday afternoon cleaning out the furnace room in my home. In the past, it’s doubled as my grow room, the place where I start seedlings and pot up plants when the weather is less than ideal outside. In the past year or so, it’s also seemingly become our junk room and triage area. It had become so filled with stuff that I was having a hard time imagining how I would ever be productive in the space again. I quickly went to work taking out bins and labeling them so I could organize the space accordingly. The finished area is now free of clutter and ready for seed starting.

Why Bother?

As a gardener on a budget, I find it incredibly important to

carefully plan and think of all garden-related things in advance. The better I plan, the less likely it is that I'll make uninformed impulse purchases down the road. Prepping and thinking about the 2019 gardening season now means that I can adequately budget and think of penny-pinching solutions to any problems I run into. Frugal gardening isn't difficult, but it requires a bit more foresight.

What to Think About Now?

It's early to think about planting locations and seeding schedules, but there's still plenty of thinking to be done before the new year rolls around. Here are some things I tend to have on my mind right about now:

- **Seed inventory** – Is there anything I need to think about replenishing? Can I swap seeds with a fellow gardener to save money? Is this a variety that did well in the recent growing season?
- **Seed starting supplies** – Can I repurpose anything from last year? Are there products that were not worth the price tag? Do I know anyone with a surplus of pots and trays that might want to make a trade? Are there any sales online for this stuff?
- **Seed starting setup** – Having my setup ready in advance means that there won't be any delays. Starting too late or not having everything prepped may end in missed planting dates. When the seed starting process is disorganized, you might find yourself more likely to spend extra money on starts in the spring. And boy does it add up!

Plan ahead. It's worth it. Trust me. You can make more intelligent purchases and avoid small buys that might cost an arm and a leg in shipping. You'll be more likely to take time to look for deals instead of rushing to get your supplies at the last minute. Procrastination only causes stress, so avoid it like the plague!

Don’t Let Your Halloween Pumpkin Go To Waste

Are you ready for Halloween? Surely you’ve already procured your pumpkin. Have you carved a scary Jack-o-Lantern yet? I hate carving, so my husband is the one who does it. He’s extraordinarily artistic and always manages to etch out something incredible. We normally buy a few pumpkins for our front porch. Some we carve, others we let be. My personal favorite part of the pumpkin tradition is getting to eat them! But there are plenty of ways to prevent those round orange globes from going to waste.

Ideas for your pumpkins

Here are a few ideas for using your Halloween pumpkin:

- **Roast those yummy seeds**. Once I start eating pumpkin seeds, I can't stop. They're so delicious and easy to make. Just keep an eye on them while they're baking to prevent burning.
- **Use the flesh**. Set aside pumpkin flesh when carving to use in cooking. Freeze or use it right away to add pumpkin-flavor to your dishes.
- **Stick it in the compost**. I'd suggest hacking it into bite-sized pieces so it can compost quicker.
- **Save the seeds for next year**.

A few recipe ideas

Pumpkin soup is one of my all-time favorite soups, and it's a very easy recipe to make in the slow cooker. Make sure to pick a smaller pumpkin, since large varieties don't have particularly tasty flesh.

Pumpkin pie is equally delicious, but I don't usually get around to making it since Canadian Thanksgiving happens before Halloween.

Risotto is often labeled as a difficult dish to master, but I find it's an easy weeknight dinner. Add pumpkin puree for a luxurious twist on your regular risotto.

Make pumpkin butter, another slow-cooker friendly option that's simple to whip up and makes a great host or hostess gift.

Happy Halloween

Whatever you decide to do with your pumpkin decorations or Jack-o-lanterns, be sure to bring them in overnight to prevent squirrels from gnawing at them. The frugal gardener knows that using a pumpkin to the fullest is eco-friendly and budget-friendly. Remember, though, you can't eat a pumpkin once it has been carved. So save the flesh while cutting and be sure

to scoop out all the seeds before setting it outside on your spooky porch or front stoop.

Gold in the Garden: Fallen Leaves

Get out your rake and get those leaves piled up because they're not just a nuisance, they're the perfect free tool for the frugal gardener. Enlist the help of a friend and collect all those leaves for use right in the garden. No need to buy bags to dispose of them!

Ways to Use Raked Leaves

There are a variety of ways to use fallen leaves in the garden. You'll need to spend some time gathering them up, but

otherwise, they're free! Here are some ideas for using up fallen leaves:

- **Winter mulch** – In Zone 5b, the winters get really cold. Even cold-hardy plants need a bit of protection. While some people recommend shredding leaves before applying them as mulch, I'm a bit lazy. I make sure to use dry ones and crumble them slightly when applying. This year, I'm using leaves to protect my fall garlic, kale, and a few other overwintering plants.
- **To line the bottom of newly installed beds** – A few years ago, my husband built 4×4 raised beds for me. They're relatively tall, so filling them is a challenge both physically and financially. Fortunately, we have two huge maple trees on our property, so we use the leaves to add volume to the bottom of the boxes before filling them up in the spring.
- **Compost pile addition** – Leaves are the perfect addition for the compost pile. Not everyone has a compost pile to add leaves to, so many cities pick up bags of leaves from their citizens. Don't bother bagging and putting them out curbside. Add them directly to your compost pile or bin.
- **Don't remove leaves that have fallen in your beds** – I've noticed that the earth in my raised beds compacts over time. It means I need to add soil each year. Instead, add leaves in the fall. They'll break down and add rich organic matter to your soil. In the spring, add a layer of finished compost over the decomposed leaves.
- **Use clean, dried leaves as autumn decor** – Skip the home decor store and use colorful autumn leaves in your seasonal decor.
- **Craft with kids** – Browse Pinterest for a variety of creative kid-friendly craft ideas to do with leaves.

No Deciduous Trees In Your Yard? No Problem

Don't have to deal with fallen leaves on your property? Lucky

you! No clean up required. That doesn’t mean you’re out of luck in the gardening-department, however. Offer to take your friend or family’s leaves off their hands. Better yet, offer your leaf raking services in exchange for free bags of leaves. It’s a win-win for everyone involved.

Caution

One word of caution when raking up and using leaves from your yard. Watch out for ticks. They’re hard to spot and even if you’re well-covered from head to toe can cling to clothing and eventually find their way onto your skin. Some areas are more likely to have ticks than others, but always make sure to do a quick skin check after playing in the leaves or gathering them up.

Is it Worth it to Grow Your Own Pumpkins?

A few years back, someone asked me whether I grew my own pumpkins for the fall season. For pies, decoration, and soups. I didn’t have any in my garden, and it made me wonder why not. In theory, I could grow beautiful pumpkins and not have to bother buying an expensive Jack-O-Lantern when Halloween came around. So is it worth it to grow your own pumpkin? Does it make sense for the frugal gardener?

Your Space

In most cases, growing vegetables of any kind is a great way to avoid high market prices at the grocery store. You decide how your food is grown, too, so you control whether pesticides or other potentially harmful substances are sprayed around your plants. So many vegetables are also low-maintenance and require very little room to thrive. Some crops, on the other hand, are space hoggers. Pumpkins, for instance, grow on a vine and need a lot of room. Some vined squash varieties can be trellised and grown vertically – which takes some extra care and planning – but pumpkins being so large are tough to train upward. If you plan on harvesting from your own pumpkin

patch, you'd better have plenty of free space.

Patience

Pumpkins require a lot of time, too. As every frugal gardener knows, time is money. They're not a plant that you can succession sow. They take a while to reach maturity. Of course, pumpkins aren't the only veggie with a long growing season, but it's something to consider.

Use

What do you plan on using your pumpkins for? Are they just for Halloween or Thanksgiving decor? If you don't particularly enjoy pumpkin dishes, you won't be getting a good return on investment. If you decide to grow pumpkins, make sure to select the appropriate type for your intended use. Carving pumpkins, for instance, aren't the same as those you might use for baking pies.

Pumpkin Pros

While pumpkins inevitably require space and patience to grow, I don't want to discourage anyone from experimenting. As with any plant, all it takes is a single seed. If you're unsure whether you'll cook with pumpkin, have enough room, or are willing to wait to enjoy the fruits of your labor, it doesn't hurt to give it a try. Pumpkins are relatively low-maintenance and grow well when direct-sown. Not willing to dedicate space to a pumpkin patch? Try a miniature variety. They're usually prolific, and you won't have to contend with behemoth fruits swallowing up your garden.

I still haven't tried growing these orange globes in my garden. I'm often impatient and ever short on space. But I am curious and always willing to experiment. I received a bonus seed packet in a recent seed order and what do you know? It was for pumpkins! I think I may be making room for my very own pumpkin patch next year!

Queen of the Cold Months: Kale

My favorite season is officially here. It’s a good thing most of my favorite vegetables are frost-hardy, cool season varieties. I recently translated some kale – one of my all-time fav veggies – into my designated winter beds, and they’re doing great. The kale trend seems to have come and gone, but I’m not hopping off the bandwagon just yet. Kale is easy to grow and can be incorporated into so many tasty dishes. I also love how many varieties there are. While it’s difficult to successfully experiment with other plants in this region of swinging temperatures, I can always count on kale to provide interesting results.

Why kale is the perfect veggie for the frugal garden

Why is it the one vegetable I must plant each year? The answer is easy.

- **Fast growing**. While not all varieties are equally quick-growing, most variants offer a quick yield.
- **Cold hardy**. It's not vulnerable to cold weather like other plants, which means I can plant it early, and sow seed for a fall and winter harvest. And kale actually gets sweeter when exposed to frost.
- **Easy to grow**. For the most part, kale requires little upkeep. I often find volunteer kale plants popping up around my beds, and even without my looking after them they seem to flourish.
- **Nutritious**. The dark leafy green is packed with nutrients and makes for a healthy addition to meals.
- **Tastes good, too**. Roasted, sautéed, or raw, kale is one of my favorite veggies to add to recipes.
- **Works as an ornamental**. Have you ever taken a close look at your town's landscaping? Some municipalities actually use kale extensively to add color and volume to street side plantings.
- **An inexpensive choice**. It's expensive at the supermarket, but growing it offers generous yields. Kale is a cut-and-come-again crop, so with proper care, it will continue to produce throughout the year. Kale seeds are also reasonably cheap.

My favorite kale varieties

I'm still working my way through all the seed catalogs I receive each year in an attempt to try out each and every kale variety. But here are some of my favorites:

Lacinato – Also known as dinosaur kale, it's a beautiful

variety with dark, long leaves. Very frost hardy.

Scarlet – A red-leafed variety that makes it easy to spot cabbage worm. Adds color to the garden.

Red Russian – Features green leaves with purple veins and seems to do very well in my zone 5 garden. Not as susceptible to pest infestations.

Tronchuda – A Portuguese kale that’s perfect for Caldo Verde soup.

Forever the trendiest veggie in my heart

While 2018 has given rise to a fermented food craze, kale still remains one of the most frequently used veggies in my household. Making it taste good isn’t very hard, and it’s a healthy choice. The vegetable is not without its challenges. The cabbage worm pest is the bane of my existence. It decimates brassicas with a fierce determination. The little green worms eat at a fantastic pace and consume an almost unbelievable volume of greens in a single day. Covering crops has been a useful solution, and picking off the little buggers can prevent a total erasure of crops as long as I’m diligent.

Even when faced with the nasty munching critters, I still choose to grow kale every year. It’s indeed a wondrous edible and perfect for adding to fall meals. The biennial plant is capable of living through the winter and growing quite tall. With varieties suitable for all growing regions, kale is a versatile option for any frugal garden.

The Cleanup Begins

I was going to write about dehydrating this week, but I haven’t gotten around to that task yet. Hopefully, my herbs won’t be wilted by the time I get to it!

Instead, I’ve found myself mostly tidying up the garden in anticipation of the end of the season. The weather has cooled down considerably, but that doesn’t mean that I’m closing up shop. Au contraire! Like weeding, it’s important to stay on top of cleaning the garden. For the frugal gardener, time is money, after all. A gradual closing down of your green space is more manageable than a scramble at the last minute.

Why tidy up?

Why not leave everything where it is? Wouldn’t that be so much easier? For the moment, probably. But, clearing dead (or almost dead) plants and prepping beds for the winter will make gardening in the new year so much easier. I know it’s

incredibly difficult to pull up plants that have produced so much over the summer, but leaving them there may encourage pests and diseases to take up residence. All that debris will also be in your way when warmer weather comes back around next year. It’s also unsightly. Tidying up the garden provides a clean slate and makes it easier to imagine next year’s bounty.

Clean up tasks

- **Pull up dead plants** – Right now, I’ve started pulling up my cucumber plant. It’s no longer producing (I suspect a pest was involved in its demise). The tomato and eggplants are done, too, so I’ll pick the last fruits and gently remove the tall plants and their stakes Removing the stakes is important since once the ground freezes, they’re stuck there.

- **Mulch** – I mulch the remaining plants and prep the empty squares for something that will be arriving in the mail quite soon: GARLIC!

- **Cover empty beds with leaves** – Squares that will remain empty until the spring are topped with fallen leaves that will decompose and add organic matter to the soil. I have a large maple tree next to my garden, so the leaves inevitably accumulate there. It’s easier to let them be.

- **Add compost** – I also add compost to the empty spots, but this year after replacing the old unit, new compost isn’t quite ready. I’ll have to make do with leaves for now.

- **Save seeds** – I haven’t gotten around to this yet, but it’s another vital cleanup task. It’s also something I’m still learning and experimenting with.

- **Store things away** – I put away any delicate pots and other garden decorations to keep them safe during the winter and prevent damage.

Slow down but don’t stop

There’s no need to pull frost-hardy vegetables. Carrots, beets, and kale, for instance, are all happy snuggling in the cooler dirt. With fall arriving, it becomes a bit harder to gauge what your remaining plants might need to survive. As the weather cools, I often completely forget that it’s still necessary to water the garden. But, your fall crops still need to drink.

Veggies still need to be harvested, mulch may be required with drier periods, and you’ll still need to keep an eye out for pests and scavengers. My gardening activities naturally wind down as autumn arrives, but it’s critical to avoid letting everything go wild. Taking care now will prevent weeds from taking up root in the spring, and pests from popping up when the sun shines bright again next year.

Recipe: Garden Inspired Sushi Bowls

I love sushi. I could eat a truckload of rolls at once. But, it’s expensive. Even the grocery store stuff has a price tag that makes me cringe. While I love treating myself to a sushi dinner once in a while, I realized that what I love about this food is how fresh it tastes. I love that I can recognize the ingredients and feel good about what I’m putting in my body.

So I decided to create my own spin on sushi at home. This recipe doesn’t require fancy tools or techniques and makes for a quick, healthy dinner when I’m busy but craving whole foods. Sushi bowls have become a well-loved dinner in my home, even my sushi-hating husband enjoys them!

Sushi Bowls

Cheaper than take-out and easier than rolling your own sushi,

these bowls are nutritious and easy to make. Some of the ingredients are also easy to grow right in your garden.

Serves 2

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup dry sushi rice (I use Calrose, a medium-grain variety)
- 1 small cucumber
- 1 small carrot
- 1 green onion
- 1/2 cup Panko breadcrumbs
- 1 cup cooked shelled frozen edamame
- Rice vinegar
- 1 avocado
- Spicy mayo (for topping) (you can buy this or make your own by mixing mayo with sriracha)
- Sesame seeds for garnish (optional)
- Faux-crab (Pollock) (omit if vegetarian)
- Soy sauce (optional)

Directions

Cook rice. I use a rice cooker to cook my rice, but cooking it on the stovetop works just as well. Follow packaging instructions. Once cooked, add a splash of rice vinegar to season the rice.

Use a vegetable peeler to ribbon the carrot. Cut up cucumber into small cubes. Thinly slice green onion. Cut up avocado into cubes.

Roughly chop the faux-crab.

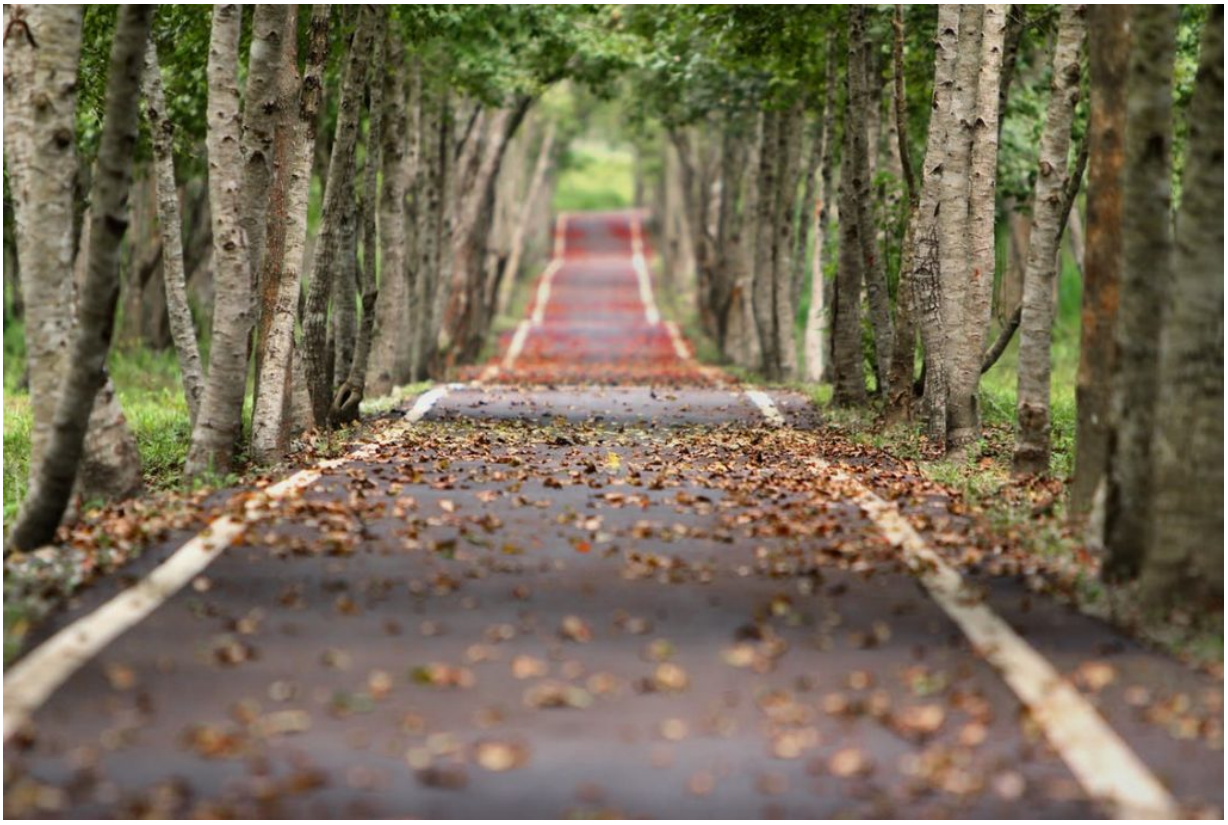
Assemble. Divide rice into bowls and top with 1/4 cup of Panko. Add cucumber, carrots, edamame, avocado, and faux-crab. Drizzle spicy mayo on top. Garnish with sesame seeds and green onion. Add a splash of soy sauce for added seasoning, if

desired.

Enjoy!

These simple bowls are the perfect idea for a healthy, satisfying weeknight dinner. You can even make simple swaps depending on the veggies you have on hand or in your frugal garden. Just because you're on a budget, doesn't mean you can't enjoy sushi in one form or another! Most of the ingredients above are easy to find and if purchased in bulk can be used in a multitude of recipes.

Goodbye Summer: Time to Keep an Eye on the Forecast



Here in the Northeast, summer seems to have disappeared

overnight. Which, I'm totally fine with. I honestly only appreciate the warm weather because it makes my garden happy. I'm ready to embrace the cold right about now. I find having a winter break is an excellent way to reset my motivation meter for the next season of planting and digging. Right around mid-January I start to get the itch to plan my garden again, though.

Right now, things are still looking green and lush in my raised beds. Despite the fluctuation in temperature, my eggplants, tomatoes, and peppers are still enjoying the afternoon sun. Does the cold weather mean that it's time to pack up? Not at all. But for the frugal gardener, paying close attention to your plants while the weather dances around is mighty important.

September tasks

This month still calls for harvesting. In fact, many plants are producing more than I can keep up with. This is the month where preserving my vegetables is at the forefront of my mind mainly because I'm sick of eating salads and fresh sliced cucumbers. To prevent waste and keep dollars in my pocket down the road during the winter, I do a lot more preserving at the tail end of the season. My favorite September kitchen tasks include:

- Making tomato jam
- Chopping up ingredients for fresh salsa
- Making pickles (out of cucumbers, peppers, and anything else that I have an abundance of)
- Cutting up chunks of eggplant to freeze for fall stews

Additionally, I'll sow fast-growing seeds (radishes, mesclun, etc.) this month. Any plants not doing well or those that have run their course, are pulled from the garden. Slowly cleaning up saves time later on in the fall.

The forecast ahead

Just because things are cooling down right now, doesn’t mean it will remain chilly all week or month. While someone with money to burn might just let Mother Nature run her course, a frugal gardener needs to keep their eyes on what’s coming weather-wise.

If you’ve got plants that are still healthy and producing, you don’t want a random frost to wipe everything out. Pay attention to the weather, so you can cover plants or bring them inside at a moment’s notice. I have a particularly impressive pepper plant this season, and I’ve moved it to my porch so I can keep a closer eye on it and bring it in if the nighttime temps get too cold. Peppers are one of my favorite veggies, and they can be costly at the supermarket, so I’m keen on keeping the plant alive as long as possible!

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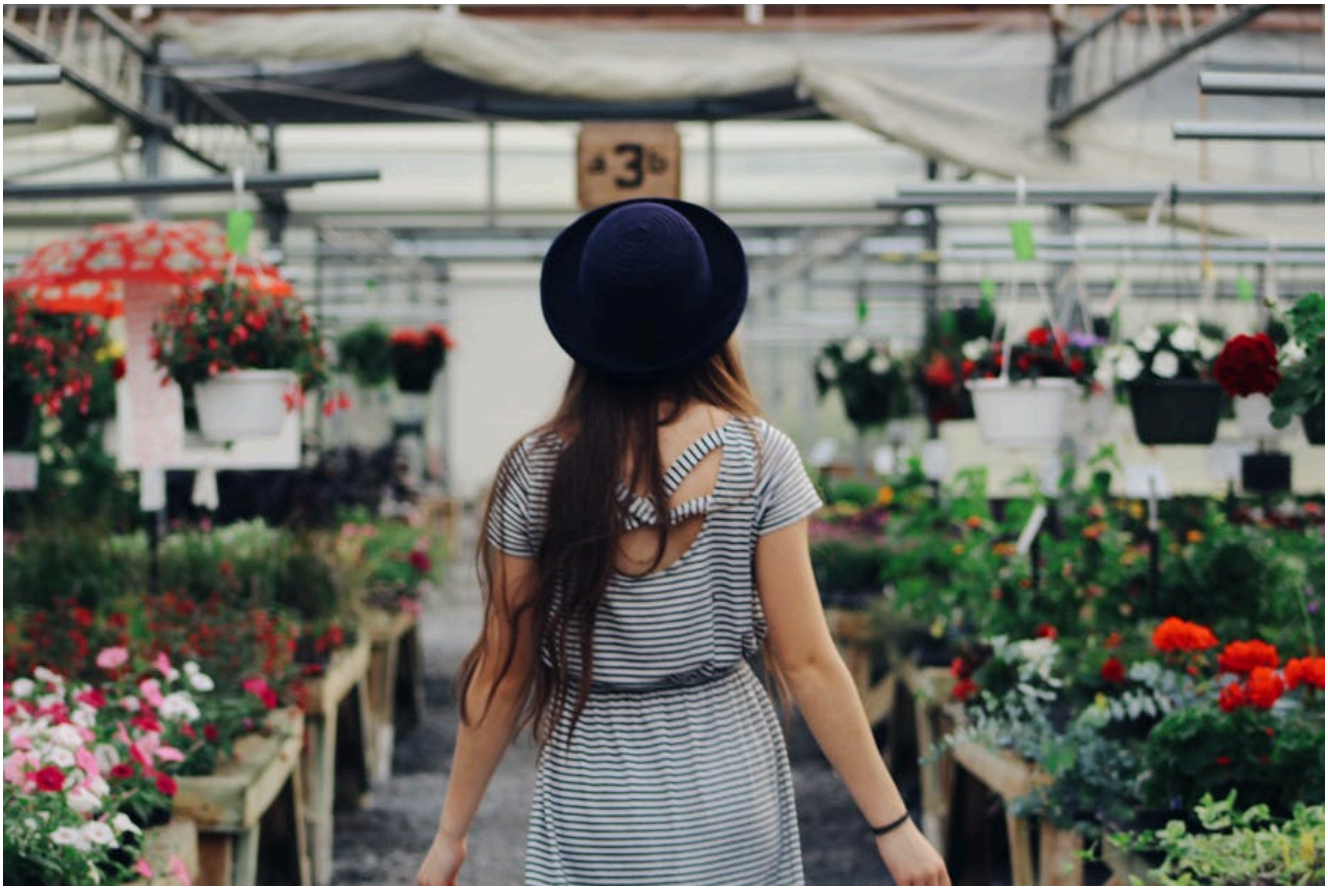
3 Key Pieces of Information for the Frugal Gardener



Gardening on a budget doesn’t have to be difficult, but it requires some know-how. Like any other gardener, a frugal one needs to be aware of certain essential pieces of information. What’s the difference? Someone who isn’t worried about over-spending can get away with making mistakes. While errors are part of the learning process, especially when it comes to this hobby, those pinching pennies have less room for error than others.

The essentials

There are some critical facts you need to know as a frugal gardener, and it’s the same advice I give any of my friends, family or acquaintances interested in getting started.

Know your planting zone. Knowing your zone allows you to pick out perennials best suited for your area. Being aware of your growing region will enable you to get an idea of the types of vegetation that can survive your climate. When it comes to growing produce, you’ll be better suited to figure out which

varieties will thrive in your area. For instance, my zone's very severe weather fluctuations make it tough to grow things like eggplant without first starting them indoors and giving them some extra TLC.

Your first and last frost dates. Some hardiness zone maps will provide you with this information, and it's essential for planting purposes. Each year these dates will fluctuate, but having a ballpark gives you an idea of when it's best to start seeds indoors, sow them outdoors, and transplant seedlings.

Your soil. If you're starting from scratch, it's a good idea to get to know what kind of earth you have. Certain soil types work best for different crops. If you discover you have very poor quality soil, it may be worth thinking about building raised beds. You'll save time and cash, in the long run, by adding your own soil mix instead of attempting to amend low-quality soil. In extreme cases, some areas may even have contaminated soil, which is a no-go for edible gardens.

Armed with knowledge

As a gardener, I've found the above information to be incredibly valuable. It's saved me from planting things that would never flourish in my area. It's also the best way to relate to other gardeners. Find out your zone, and it's easy to discover others who have to deal with the same climate as you. You can discover the tricks and techniques that others in your area use that may apply only to your zone. Knowing your area's frost dates is critical, too. Having the dates in mind prevents me from succumbing to the temptation to plant seedlings out early. Every year I wonder what the harm would be and every year, abiding by the frost dates usually saves me from disaster. Finding out the soil on my property was mostly rocks and pebbles largely factored into my decision to create raised bed gardens. All these pieces of information will enable you to work with Mother Nature instead of against her, and in doing so, you'll save yourself from wasting time,

effort, and money.

Frugal Gardening: Battling Burnout

As September draws near, this is the time of year I find myself most vulnerable to gardening burnout. Midsummer weather is fierce, produce starts to ripen at a lightning fast pace, and weeds seem to grow out of control all of a sudden. If you're new to gardening, this is an especially delicate time. But don't despair! Burnout is normal and temporary.

What's gardening burnout?

One of my other hobbies aside from gardening is running, and

burnout is a term that’s thrown around often in the running community. Magazines, online articles, and coaches all put forth tips to combat overtraining and burnout. It usually happens because a runner takes on too much, isn’t listening to their body, and doesn’t take the proper rest required to stay in tip-top shape.

I believe the same thing can easily happen to gardeners. Especially those dealing with budgetary concerns. I love to garden, but having to pinch pennies and find ways to keep my gardening low-cost is a stressor all on its own. Pair that overwhelming concern with the hard work needed to nurture a garden and it’s no wonder that when September rears its head that many among us run out of steam.

How to deal with gardening burnout

Unusually hot weather, garden pests, and plants that may not be thriving can leave gardeners discouraged. The further we get into the gardening season, the more there is to do. You may be tired of walking out to the garden to discover cabbage moths munching on your kale or find it hard to deal with setbacks. I recently had to pull a squash plant after it was irreparably damaged from a vine borer infestation. Don’t let the setbacks deter you. Here’s how to get some of that gardening mojo back, without spending money this late in the season.

- **Switch your watering schedule**. Tired of waking up early to water your thirsty plants? Do it in the evening instead. Or, check the weather and let Mother Nature do some of the work. Daily waterings are ideal in the heat of the summer, but I’ll admit that sometimes I’m tired of trudging out there. If I see a rainstorm is in the forecast for the next few days, I don’t feel guilty skipping a day.
- **Accept some losses**. Squirrels are going to munch on cobs of corn. Caterpillars are going to nibble on your

collards. This late in the summer, there's no use trying to mount a full assault on these dreaded garden enemies. Pick off the worms and shake your fist at the squirrels, but don't let it get to you.

- **Start cleaning**. Some plants may start to wilt and look worse for wear. It may be the weather, it may just be that a particular variety isn't doing well in your garden. Don't sweat it. Dispose of it and plant a quick growing fall crop (e.g., radishes, mesclun mix, arugula).
- **Enlist some help**. Ask friends or family to help you with your gardening tasks for a day. Make it a fun activity for kids. Pick ripe veggies and clean up weeds together rather than solo. Make a veggie feast as a reward for everyone's hard work.
- **Don't feel obligated**. You don't *need* to do anything. If you're spent, you don't need to plant fall crops. In fact, being ready to close the garden when fall comes around can leave you well-prepared for next year.

Rest easy

Know that you're not alone. Plenty of people find themselves overwhelmed and tired of their gardening routine at some point during the season. Welcome the colder weather ahead with open arms. I find that knowing that there's a winter season coming helps me to mentally rest and recharge for the next year of playing in the dirt. By the time January rolls around, I'm usually itching to start planning and prepping my seed starting stations.

Why is coping with burnout important for a frugal gardener? When your garden grows rapidly, and it feels tough to keep things organized and sorted out, it's tempting to find easy ways and shortcuts to deal with problems. It's a surefire way to find yourself spending money unnecessarily. A little bit more of a laid-back attitude can help you prevent impulse buys. Cabbage loopers driving you insane? Don't run to the

store to buy a pricey pesticide. Summer is nearing an end, after all! Leave it to the birds and enjoy those fresh grown tomatoes.