

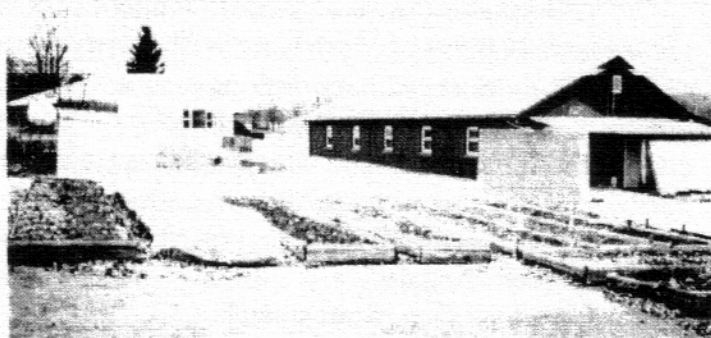
# Backyard Gardens: The Last Frontier

Domestic gardens are as old as civilization, but for many Americans, even many Appalachians, the conversion of lawn to garden is a new venture. A surprisingly small amount of space can meet an entire household's vegetable needs. Some are held back, not by the question of space, but by the risk of failure in the eyes of neighbors. That is not a major hurdle. Please consider these twelve advantages of a backyard garden and twelve easy steps to achieving a successful one. Note: Although we use the term *backyard*, how about extending the edible landscape into the front yard as well?

## Twelve Advantages of Backyard Gardening

Gardening has many advantages:

1. **Resource Conservation** - Backyard gardens result in immense savings in the energy costs of transporting food and of keeping a manicured lawn;
2. **Environmental Preservation** - The growing of extra vegetables helps move one away from resource intensive meat and processed foods towards more "green" vegetarian foods;
3. **Quality of Life** - Gardening can lead to a better quality of fresh food that is guaranteed pesticide-free and organically grown;
4. **Psychological Value** - Gardeners become their native places by assimilating food from their own lands. In growing food we begin to have a sense of taking control over our own lives and gaining self-respect;
5. **Eco-Justice** - Backyard gardening is a vote against factory farming especially when home-grown vegetables replace some of the resource intensive meat in the diet - and most Americans eat too much meat (an average of 246 lbs./person/year). Gardening replaces food grown through the exploitation of migrant farm workers, who are often forced to work without adequate protection against agricultural poisons and without rudimentary sanitation in their living quarters;
6. **Spirituality** - Touching the soil becomes a religious experience and reinforces our bonding to the Creator and all Creation. Through a closer proximity to nature we enter into the rhythm of nature's liturgy;
7. **Aesthetics** - Backyard gardens can be beautiful and worth gazing upon and admiring for their own sake. Growing crops gives us a sense of great pleasure and an appreciation of the little things of life - and in some way the plants know that we are admiring them;



*Our high-yield raised bed gardens at Mt. Vernon  
Small Town Appropriate Technology Center*

8. **Personal Health** - Obvious health benefits accrue to people of all ages who garden and especially to older people, who often neglect proper exercise, full spectrum sunlight and fresh air;

9. **Advocacy** - Gardening is the entry into a less stressful and simpler life, harking back to the lives of our pioneer ancestors. Some are able to see the garden as a model and through our gentle example and conversation may be led to live more simply;

10. **Formation of Community** - Growing gardens allows us more opportunities to be outdoors with neighbors and to come to know them. Gardens are natural and easy conversation pieces that are far more interesting than sports and the weather - though weather is part of gardening also;

11. **Finances** - Backyard gardens can save money otherwise spent on food and on lawn care products. If we price our time spent gardening we may not meet minimum wages, but the other advantages are priceless. Besides, consider the savings in medical care and exercise clubs;

12. **Learning Opportunity** - We are never too old to grow in knowledge, and gardening involves learning from much literature, from experienced neighbors, and from the plants themselves.

## Twelve Steps for Making an Excellent Backyard Garden

1. **Decide to Convert Lawns to Edible Landscape.** During World War II America planted 30 million *victory gardens*, many of which were in backyards or nearby vacant lots. Today our population is half again larger, and record numbers of backyard gardens are being planted each year. Appalachia, which has an illustrious history of fine domestic gardens, is haltingly joining this trend after . Many people have moved into suburbs carved from fertile farmland which could make excellent garden plots. Others have gardens on flood plains or nearby hillsides now in lawn. If lawns, which require vast amounts of fuel, muscle energy, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides, were replaced by backyard gardening, we could grow half the produce we need in our immediate neighborhoods. Appalachia, would save and keep at home half its food money. It takes will power to decide to convert lawn to garden. Start small but do start.

2. **Make a Tentative Plan.** A backyard garden requires planning, some work, tender loving care, and an eye to the ultimate impact on the neighbors. Prepare for the possible nearby crank who wants your lawn to look like the rest. This is your opportunity to advocate for edible landscape and good food as well. Before digging up the land address a few questions: What do I want the backyard to look like in a year or so? How much time and effort am I willing to spend? Am I willing to start off small and not burn out? Will I arrange the garden so that frequently-used herbs and vegetables are closest to the kitchen? Do I select some fruits and vegetables that are extremely low-maintenance, e.g., Alpine strawberries or blueberries? Will I use miniaturized versions of fruit or nut trees? Will I plant perennials as well as annuals?

3. **Determine to Go Organic.** One needs to start the process of turning kitchen and yard wastes to humus. If one does not grow things, the composting operation does not make much sense. Vegetables, fruits and herbs appreciate compost more than does a lawn. See our technical paper TP-11 *Composting for Gardens*. Composting is a partial answer to thoughtless domestic waste disposal. Cash-short growers, take note. A compost pile generates valuable fertilizing material and can be set off from the rest of the garden in a shady place. It is also a partial answer to the waste problem and allows us to be responsible for disposing of our own waste in our own and not someone else's backyard.

4. **Plan Variety and Proper Amounts.** Gardeners naturally plant what the family likes. There are the bulk crops such as tomatoes, beans and corn. Consider adding kohlrabi and potatoes as bulk crops that could be sustaining throughout the year. Introduce the household to new varieties each year and couple with asking experienced cooks for appetizing recipes, or invest in cookbooks. Soups, salads, stir-fries, and casseroles with various herbs and fillers are wonderful additions. Try about 30-40 varieties of vegetables and herbs each year

and plant fruit trees and berry bushes that will yield in time. Stagger planting to have greens and other produce throughout the growing season and beyond. Emphasize variety because too much of a good thing makes folks tire of oversupplies. Who wants zucchini for a month? Select varieties that can be stored or preserved with little effort (such as squash, beets or carrots). See TP-24 *Root Cellars* and TP-6 *Solar Food Dryer*.



**5. Consider Raised Beds.** The backyard can be plowed or tilled with gas-powered implements, or can provide an opportunity to the able-bodied for seasonal exercise. Raised beds take extra effort at the start, but there is immediate payback: ease at reaching, tending and harvesting the produce; loose, well drained soil; greater production per unit size, for growing plants will form a canopy over the pathways; less tillage during the season; and less need to break up the soil cover each succeeding year. Try it and see. A family of four could obtain about half its produce from a sunny moist area the size of the average home. Choose to grow vegetables that do not require extensive space but yield much on little space. The American Indian practice of growing beans, corn and squash in one hill is good practice for the raised bed garden.

**6. Interplant Where Possible.** Space is precious. Experienced gardeners know approximately when radishes or greens will be finished in late spring and thus the proper timing for interplanting tomatoes or other crops that will have their slow, early start under the shade of the maturing first crop. Though some vegetables do not like to grow with onions, spring onions are still an ideal beginning crop for interplanting; as the first crop is harvested, the second will be going into its major growth period. Thus the average site will yield two crops (some exceptions are the slow maturing ones like salsify or rutabaga). Interplanting may include wildlife edibles (for birds), for one needs to attract the birds to help reduce the insect populations that will inevitably come. Also consider interplanting flowers like marigolds and nasturtiums that attract beneficial insects and improve overall garden health. See TP-13 *Organic and Intensive Gardening*.

**7. Think Year-round Fresh Produce.** Unlike a grass lawn, the backyard garden incorporates the realities and limitations of plants in terms of growing season and blooming periods. By realizing that certain vegetation is most productive at different times of the year, one can design year-round edible landscaping. Harvest squash, Japanese radishes, potatoes, onions, carrots, and other crops for winter use and store in dry cool areas. Build a small permanent cold frame for fresh collards, celery, parsley and kale. Beds covered with *Reemay* (a fine cloth covering that is used for outdoor plant beds) extend the growing season for Swiss chard, kale, endive, and spinach into January. It may be possible to combine a solar greenhouse with the garden to both grow seedlings and furnish some extra produce during the winter period. See TP-7 *Year-Round Gardening* and TP-4 *Solar Greenhouses*.

**8. The Real Secret - Plant Early.** A good end-of-year or first-of-January exercise is to plan the new calendar year's garden. Order seeds by mid-January. Start the earliest seedlings by late that month or early February. In our part of Appalachia the brassicas should be transplanted in March. Never get peas out later



than the end of February, even if they risk being nipped by frost or colder weather. In March (or early April in cooler zones) sow kale, mustard, lettuce, endive, and other plants in rows. Bed sowing is preferred in autumn for the same crops. Rows or mulching all for better weed control. In cooler times the young plants need cloth covering or temporary cold frames. We start onions, lettuce, radishes, carrots, beets, brassicas, some herbs and Swiss chard early, so that they yield produce before the insects and hot weather arrive.

**9. Observe the Garden Frequently.** Constant and keen observation helps the grower know crop conditions on a day-by-day basis.

\* Pick and kill the first pests that appear. When these critters are removed early, numerous descendants can't bother us in the future;

\* Water the crop when conditions are too dry. Rain water in a cistern is better than chlorinated municipal water. If necessary, build a cistern to assist domestic gardening. See TP-3 *Cisterns*. When watering, use water only on the most sensitive plants (tomatoes, melons, greens, eggplant). Some produce tolerate dry conditions quite well (Swiss chard, onions, peppers). Water individual plants, not the entire row. Small pipes could be inserted to carry water directly to the root zone. Mulch will certainly help hold in the moisture along with giving needed shade to the plants. See TP-22 *How Much do you Mulch?*

\* Frequent tilling is a key to a healthy and clean garden. With raised beds the land drains rapidly and allows for tilling much sooner than possible in traditional gardens. As soon as the soil is ready give it a quick hoeing, stirring it before the tiny weeds have a chance. Neglecting weeds for an extra week may produce an unwelcome sod that will be hard to remove.

**10. Cover the Cropland in Winter.** This seems to contradict year-round crop growing. Actually cover crops can be interplanted. Vetch, winter peas and other cover crops are easily interplanted with some brassicas and certain crops that yield throughout late fall and even winter. The cover crop is not aggressive in cooler times and adds nitrogen while protecting exposed soil, as well as furnishing green manure at the start of the next growing season.

**11. Give the Land a Sabbath.** A rabbi asked us whether we give our land sabbaths. We accepted his kindly advice and try to allow some land to be left in cover crops each year. For intensive gardeners this means setting aside about a seventh of the space. Rest is good. Fertilize areas well with manure, composted materials, and a light sprinkling of wood ashes. Test the soil periodically to discover specific needs.

**12. Finally, Keep Good Records.** Some gardeners record yields, time of planting, and type of seed in their heads. We older folks need a record book. Records allow one to become more adventuresome. Try planting untried cultivars. Consider using and saving heritage seeds.