

Spring Gardening: A Comprehensive Guide to Getting Started

InsideHook connected with the pros to give you the best advice on how to grow your own produce this year

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You'll thank us when you're picking fresh fruits and veggies all summer

Danica Killelea

Gardening is difficult work. Not only is it physically intense, but getting plants to actually grow and thrive is no easy task — especially if you're new to the practice. But if you've ever wanted to try your hand at spring gardening, this year is the time to take the plunge. Not only is growing your own food one of the most satisfying and delicious skills a human can have, but learning how to do it well is a lifelong process, which is no doubt good for the mind. To help you get started, we connected with multiple [gardening](#) professionals to give us their expert advice, from compost to gear and everything in-between.

Soil, Fertilizer and Compost

Whether you're growing your garden in the ground or in raised beds, you have to make sure your soil has good drainage. Ben Pauly, master gardener at [Woodstock Inn & Resort](#), says that you can buy blocks of coconut fiber or peat to mix with your soil, but potting soil is a good bet, especially for beginners. "Potting soil is full of peat, coco fiber, perlite and even wood chips, which provide a certain amount of drainage," he says.

As always with spring gardening, organic is best. Merrifield mentions the "living soil" approach, which is another trend he sees being implemented in at-home growing more often. "Just like probiotics are good for your tummy, your soil will really benefit from that, too," he says. "You don't want to burn either with chemicals. Chemical pest control and fertilizers use heavy metals and salts to get those nutrients in a water-soluble form that the roots can drain. So if you use that, the plant gets a short-term nutrient boost, but at the cost of their gut health, so to speak."

This means using fertilizer made with organic materials rather than the commercial, chemical stuff like Miracle-Gro. "Fish and seaweed fertilizers like [Neptune's Harvest](#) (and there are other ones out there) have a slew of nutrients in them and can help give your plants a boost, even mid-season," Pauly says.

Along with quality soil and organic fertilizer, compost is one of the absolute best things you can do for your plants. We understand it's daunting — stockpiling smelly food scraps that will somehow break down into nutrient-rich plant food without knowing anything about it. But compost is so good for a garden, you should just give it a try and not worry too much. "I'm sure some compost pros would say there's a million mistakes, but I'm saying just get into it, start composting and think about the details and dial it in as you go," Merrifield says. "It's very accessible to get started."

"The best thing you can do for your gardening is adding compost," Pauly says. "The bare minimum is a quarter inch, but really having an inch or two on top helps you increase your organic matter, soil nutrition and drainage — it's really what improves your soil structure and creates life. There's really no substitute. And compost that you make is rich with all those microbes, whereas composts you buy in a bag tend to be a bit more sterile."

Learning to compost takes time and energy, but the payoff is worth it when you see the benefit it brings to your garden. “The more you do it and the more you learn about it, the more fun it becomes,” says Taylor Hiers, manager at Kelly Way Gardens, Woodstock Inn’s farm-to-table program. “When I started at Kelly Way Gardens, Ben was explaining the compost thing to me, and it seemed like a lot of work. But the more I did it throughout the years, the more I enjoyed it. It’s more of a goal for me now to create the best soil that I possibly can.”



Produce haul from Kelly Way Gardens

Woodstock Inn & Resort

If you have the time and resources to start growing from seed, it’s certainly a rewarding option. But if you live somewhere that has a cold spring and don’t want to drop a lot of money on grow lights to start them inside, then buying seedlings is probably your best bet. “Anything that you start on a windowsill is not really going to have six hours of direct sunlight,” Hiers says. “So barely anyone has the right conditions nationally to grow seed. I think the idea of starting seed on your own to save money can be true, but there’s also potentially a lot of investment [with all the equipment you have to buy].”

But obviously, if you have the space and supplies to grow from seed, go for it. Pauly and Heirs are based in Vermont, so they buy seeds from Vermont and Maine because the companies based in those states sell produce that will grow well in New England. So it makes sense to find a seed company in your region.

If you want to buy seedlings, there are a couple of options. “If you have a good nursery and you’re able to buy anything, that’s fantastic and that’s where you want to go,” Pauly says. But your local farmers market is also a great place to purchase seedlings — and get some guidance for spring gardening.

“Check in with your local farmers markets,” Merrifield says. “That’s where you’re going to get the very best advice, not only about cool, new things that they’re excited to grow, but also most farmers market vendors and gardeners are really passionate about what they do. They love to have those conversations.”

Tomatoes

If you’ve ever tried to grow tomatoes before, you can likely attest that they’re a finicky fruit. They’re disease-prone and can get easily stressed out by environmental factors, so you have to make sure your growing conditions are right before investing in plants. And although Pauly says what we all know is true, that “heirloom tomatoes are the holy grail of summertime,” newbies can have much more luck with cherry tomatoes.

“[Even] in patio pots, cherry tomatoes are much more productive,” Pauly says. “They tend to be a little more disease resistant. So people who are on the fence about growing tomatoes might want to stay with cherry tomatoes because they’re much more vigorous.”

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