

Get Into Gardening # Easily

When you were a kid, there was nothing better than running around outside, with the wind in your hair and the earth under your bare feet. Now that you've grown, you might be surprised to find that the feeling is exactly the same. If you haven't tried gardening, it's time to roll up your sleeves, and pant legs, and get acquainted with the great outdoors.

If you are just starting to get into gardening, it's best to start small. A tidy plant bed of 25 to 30 square feet is best, with room for about 30 plants. This will give you a chance to exercise your green thumb without facing a huge project that leaves you feeling overwhelmed. If, after your first season, you realize that you really love gardening, you can always increase your garden size and your plantings next year.

Choosing the site is your next step. Of course, where you live will ultimately determine where your garden will be. Ideally, your garden plot will be situated in an area that receives at least six hours of daylight. Try to stay away from large trees, as their roots can rob your plants of water and nutrients. It's also a good idea to keep your garden at least three feet from any fences or buildings. In hot climates, try to choose an area that will provide your garden with shade from some of the intense afternoon sun. Healthy gardens can certainly grow with more or less direct sunlight, but you may have to be flexible with the variety of plants that you choose. Finally, a site with good soil is best, although the quality and condition of the soil can always be improved. It's advisable to avoid areas with rocky soil, steep slopes or poor drainage.

After you've chosen the location, it's time for the real fun to begin: when you can dig in and really get into gardening. This is not a clean hobby, so prepare to get a little dirt under your nails. First, you're going to need to remove any rocks, debris, weeds and grass from your garden pot, and then use a spade or pitchfork to dig down about one foot deep. Mix in compost or minerals if required, and level the dirt. If your soil is too acidic, add lime; if it's too sandy, add peat moss. When you add in the proper fertilizer, your plants will thrive in either neutral or acidic soil.

The beds are ready and it's time to plant your garden. Deciding whether to start from seeds or plants is really a personal choice, although starting with plants can help you to determine the final growing pattern more clearly. Be sure to choose plants with healthy roots and green leaves and stems. Avoid "leggy" plants that have long stalks, or plants with yellowed leaves. When planting, position smaller plants at the front of the bed, and larger ones behind. The key to a successful beginning in gardening is planting at the right time. Make sure that the risk of frost has passed before planting your tender varieties, although some annuals, like pansies and violas, can safely weather the spring frost. If you are planting seeds, read the package for important information about when and how to plant.

Your plants will receive regular care and attention to help them thrive. Watering is absolutely essential to having healthy plants. If you have a few plants, such as in balcony or patio planters, you can easily accomplish this task by hand watering. However, larger gardens require the use of a garden hose with a sprinkler or nozzle. Don't be skimpy with the water; make sure the roots receive adequate moisture. Watering is most effective early in the morning when the temperature is still cool. Watering during the hot afternoon sun is a waste of money, as the moisture evaporates before it reaches the root systems. Watering in the late afternoon or evening can cause moisture to stay on your plants all night, creating mildew and disease. Knowing how often to water depends entirely on the types of plants you've chosen. Most require about an inch a week. During hot spells, your plants should be watered three times a week.

Finally, use mulch or compost as natural protection and weed control for your garden. Adding just a few inches of organic mulch will keep the roots cool, greatly improve the fertility of your plants, and help the soil to retain moisture. Wood chips, grass clippings, manure, leaves, and pine needles can all be used as mulch.

Once you get into gardening, you'll wonder why on earth you haven't done it till now. Aside from the absolute joy you'll feel from harvesting your own delicious vegetables and beautiful flowers, you'll remember just how much you've missed the wind and the earth. You'll feel like a kid again.