Finney Farm's Quick and Dirty Guide to Backyard Gardening

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First of all, this guide was written for backyards in the Pacific Northwest region, basically zone 7. Secondly, we deal only with organic practices. Although we personally don't like to use chemicals at all, there just isn't any real reason to use them on a backyard garden.

Where will your garden grow? While there are some oddball methods, most gardens happen in containers, raised beds, or in the ground (or variations on those themes). Ideally, you'll have a nice spot with at least 8 hours of sunshine. Decent drainage is also a consideration if you're growing in the ground. We'll address each type of garden below; your own garden can be one type of any combination of all garden spots.

Container gardens are grown in….you guessed it, containers! These containers may come in all shapes and sizes-basically you should consider the mature size of the plant/veggie to get an idea of the minimum size of container. For instance, you could use a 1 gallon coffee can (with holes punched in the bottom) to grow a basil plant, bush bean plant, or a head of lettuce, but it would be too small for a tomato or squash plant. Another consideration is what the container was originally used for. Some people use 5 gallon buckets which were formerly used to hold laundry detergent-a good rule of thumb when considering reusing containers is to ask yourself if you'd use it to store drinking water. If not, it probably shouldn't be used to grow food. Don't forget that you'll need to punch holes in the bottom of your container(s) for drainage.

Containers are great because they may be used in all sorts of places that aren't practical for raised beds or in ground gardens. You can use containers to grow a substantial garden in a large sunny window, you can place containers along a cement sidewalk or up a set of outdoor stairs. Containers are great for renters, and they're great for situations in which your ground soil has been compromised by chemical contaminants. There are two major drawbacks with containers—one is that you are limited by the size of your container(s) and the other is that you will need to monitor the moisture level of your soil more frequently. Since your plants have a root growth limit (size of the container) they can't develop long roots that can seek out water. They will need to be watered more frequently.

Raised Beds are good choice for a variety of reasons. They can be installed without a tiller or the need to remove sod, they have good drainage, you may build them with good soil on a site which has poor or contaminated soil, they prevent soil compaction, they serve as a barrier to some pests like slugs, they may help with reducing back strain, they warm up quicker than the ground, and so on. If you want to make a raised bed, an easy way is to create a lasagna style bed. First, measure and build your box; the length isn't so important, but they should be 3-4' feet wide and are usually at least a food high. You want to be able to reach the middle from either side of the bed. If you have a good budget or excellent scrounging skills, the best box for a raised bed is made of untreated cedar which will last for decades (you can always disassemble and move it to a new location if you're renting). You can also use regular, untreated 2x4s stacked up, or even just skinny logs or thick branches stacked up and staked in with rebar or a wooden stake every couple of feet or so; and if you have a permanent spot you can use stone or even cinder blocks. Do not use pressure treated wood or railroad ties. We just don't see the point of putting so much work into growing food in soil that is contaminated with

chemicals. There are many other easy options, so it shouldn't be a problem. After your bed is built, place a layer of cardboard over the sod. If you have some branches or skinny/small pieces of firewood, you can put those on the bottom. Next, add a layer of straw or leaves. If you have food waste (like you'd put in a compost pile) you can pile it on top of this layer, and then add another layer of straw or leaves. If you have compost, you can top the whole thing off with it. Or, you can some good topsoil or purchased organic potting soil or compost. This last layer of compost and/or soil should be at least 6 inches deep.

In ground gardens are great for people who plan to be in one place for a while. If you're starting with sod, you'll probably want to remove it first. Then, use a shovel or garden fork to loosen the soil. You can rent or borrow a tiller to do much of the work at this point, or you can continue to work the soil until it is nice and fluffy. There are MANY types of garden layouts, and it would be a good idea to do some research. At the end of this guide you'll find a list of suggest websites and books. Generally speaking, we prefer beds to rows if for no other reason than you'll have more room for food with fewer paths. It is great to get your soil tested which you may do with an affordable home kit, but pretty much all new gardens (especially those which were formerly lawns) do well with some organic compost. We add this after the layout is created to avoid wasting nutrients on paths. You can use cardboard, or cardboard and straw to cover your paths so that you can cut down on weeding.

There are many, many, details in growing your own food…but here are a few basic suggestions that new gardeners might find helpful.

We start most of our plants in our greenhouse, but we're going to assume that most backyard gardeners are working without the benefit of one. Here is a list of easy crops to grow from seed. The first is a table highlighting some crops which may be used for succession planting, i.e. staggering plantings throughout the season to increase yield. You'll find that in the hottest part of the summer, some of these succession crops may not work well…they will sometimes "bolt" in the heat, so you may want to skip a couple of plantings when it gets really hot.

Lettuce	You can sprinkle directly onto soil. One or two packets of seed will usually provide enough lettuce for a small family for a season.	Plant every couple of weeks from March-Oct for steady supply.
Turnips, Radish, Rutabaga, Beets	Sprinkle directly into soil, lightly cover.	Plant every couple of weeks from March-Oct for steady supply.
Spinach	Loves partial shade, and does not do well in heat.	Plant every couple of weeks from March-Oct for steady supply.
Snap peas	Better in spring and fall	Plant every couple of weeks from March-Oct for steady supply.

February-start indoors tomatoes, peppers, onions, eggplant
March/April: Peas, lettuce, beets, carrots, turnips, radish, spinach, greens, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, kale, parsnip, cabbage, basil, potato, etc.
May: Corn, beans, squash, cucumber, melons (will probably not ripen without greenhouse), etc.
Fall: Garlic, shallots, Fava, winter garden greens

A lot of new gardeners plant seeds too deeply. A good rule of thumb is to plant a seed no deeper than the diameter of the seed itself. After planting, you'll want to keep the area well watered. A sprinkle can is helpful, as is a good hand nozzle for the hose. Well established plants can handle some neglect better than baby plants, so pay particular attention after sowing seed or transplanting new plants.

Many people are concerned with fertilizer. With healthy, organic practices like mulching and manures, there is little call for additional fertilizer. However, sometimes plants need a little boost and here's how we do it. First of all, do not use Miracle Grow or anything like it. We use compost tea. You'll need a five gallon bucket, an old pillowcase, bat guano, and some compost or manure. With a $10 box of bat guano, and a $5 bag of organic compost, you can usually make enough tea for a backyard garden for two seasons. Take a couple quarts of the compost and a handful of bat guano and put it into the pillowcase. Tie it closed, drop it in the bucket and fill with water. Wait 2-5 days and use to water your plants-best if done in the evening or early morning.

There are many types of pests and many ways to deal with them. The biggest issue in this area is usually slugs. Forget everything about beer traps, diatomaceous earth, copper strips, etc…and just walk through your garden in the early morning and early evening during the spring, early summer, and fall. Pick the slugs out of your garden and dispose of them—if you have ducks, they'll happily gobble them up. Other pests include flea beetles, cabbage worms, root maggots, and common diseases are blight, powder mildew, and gray mold. Again, many ways to deal with these issues but if you are looking for a product to use just look for an OMRI emblem on the label. This means it is a certified organic product and is alright to use (although these sorts of things should be a last resort). The same goes for fertilizers—if you need to buy something, make sure it is OMRI certified.

Since this is a quick guide instead of a book, we'll have to leave off here. Below you'll find a list of resource, please use them!

Books we like: How to Grow More Vegetables by John Jeavons, Rodales Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening, Square Foot Gardening by Mel Bartholomew, 4 Season Harvest by Eliot Colemenn, The One-Straw Revolution by Masanobu Fukuoka, Gaia's Garden by Toby Hemenway, Permaculture in a Nutshell by Patrick Whitefield…. And many more. Contact us for a better list!

Local supplies: Skagit Farmers (Cenex), Skagit Food Co-op

Need seeds? Contact us at info@finneyfarm.org