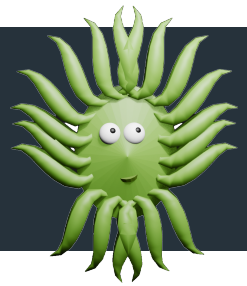
Start a Garden

Blank ground to first harvest, in the right order.

Three to five forgiving crops beat fifteen ambitious ones.



Six steps, in order

Get the first three right and the rest gets easy.

1 Pick the spot

Sun first. Most vegetables want six or more hours of direct sun. Find the sunniest spot. It doesn't have to be pretty.

Hose in reach. A garden you can't water easily is one you'll stop watering.

Start small. A 4x8 raised bed or a 10x10 plot is plenty. You can expand, but you can't un-expand.

2 Prepare the soil

Raised bed: a frame filled with quality topsoil and compost. You control the soil, and drainage is excellent.

In the ground: clear grass and weeds, loosen 12 inches deep, and work in several inches of compost.

Free soil test: ask your county extension office.

Good soil is loose, dark, and smells like earth.

3 Know your calendar

Look up your last frost date by zip code. Everything else is counted from it.

It's an average, not a promise. Central New Jersey, for example, is about April 15.

Write it on the calendar and build your plan around it (see page 2).

4 Choose what to plant

Easy wins: zucchini, beans, lettuce, radishes (25 days seed to table), cherry tomatoes, basil, parsley, chives.

Save for later: large tomatoes, corn, melons, and anything a guide calls "delicate."

Three to five crops for a first garden. Success with three beats partial failure with fifteen.

5 Seeds or seedlings?

Sow seeds: beans, peas, carrots, radishes, beets, lettuce, spinach, zucchini, cucumbers, sunflowers. Many hate being moved.

Buy seedlings: tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, broccoli. Long seasons need a head start.

Either: basil, kale, chard, most herbs.

6 Water, mulch, wait

Water: about an inch a week. Poke a finger 2 inches down: dry, water; damp, wait. Overwatering kills more plants than underwatering.

Mulch: 2 to 3 inches of straw, wood chips, or shredded leaves keeps moisture in and weeds down.

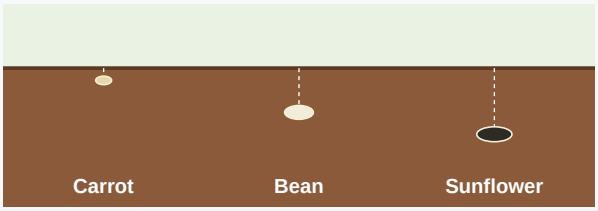
Wait and watch. Visit daily to observe, not to fiddle.

How deep to plant

The packet's number beats the rule.

The rule: 2 to 3 times the seed's width. Not its length. Large seeds go deeper, tiny seeds barely under the surface. **When in doubt, plant shallower.** A shallow seed can often push through; a deep one rarely does.

Seedlings go in at the depth they grew in the pot. **Tomatoes are the exception:** bury the stem and it grows roots all along it.



Barely covered *About 1 inch* *About 1½ inches*

Read the seed packet

Ninety seconds that answer most questions.

On the front

Variety name. "Sun Gold" or "Roma," not just "tomato." It sets flavor, size, and disease resistance.

Days to maturity. A 90-day tomato needs 90 frost-free days after transplanting.

Annual, perennial, biennial. One season, every year, or two years.

On the back

Depth and spacing. Spacing is not a suggestion. Crowded plants produce less and get sick more.

Sow indoors or direct sow, with the timing counted from your last frost.

Sun: full is 6+ hours, part shade 3 to 6, full shade under 3.

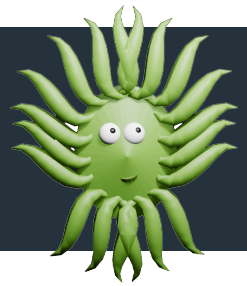
Days to germination. Don't declare failure early. "Do not cover" means press the seed on the surface.

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Timing and Troubleshooting

Plant by the calendar, then rescue what looks wrong.

Most garden problems are one fixable thing.



Plant by the calendar

Count back and forward from your last frost date.

6 to 8 weeks before

Start indoors

Tomatoes, peppers, eggplant: 6 to 8 weeks before. **Broccoli, cauliflower:** 4 to 6. The packet knows the timing. Light is what beginners underestimate: a grow light 2 to 4 inches above the seedlings, 14 to 16 hours a day. Water from below.

As soon as soil can be worked

Sow cool-season crops

Peas, lettuce, spinach, carrots, radishes, kale, potatoes. They tolerate light frost and like it cool.
In summer heat they bolt, so give them an early start.

The anchor

Last frost date

An average, not a promise. Frost (32°F) freezes the water inside plant cells and bursts them.
Cold night coming? Cover tender plants with frost cloth or a bedsheet.

1 to 2 weeks after

Tender plants go out

Transplant tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant, hardened off first. **Sow** beans, squash, cucumbers, corn, sunflowers. **Plant** basil. Planting the day after frost is gambling.

When something looks wrong

Almost always fixable.

Seeds won't sprout

Check five things:

1. Temperature. Most seeds want soil at 60 to 75°F. Air can be 70 while the soil is 48. A soil thermometer costs about $10.

2. Moisture. Damp like a wrung-out sponge, never soggy, never dry. Mist rather than flood.

3. Depth. Too deep is the common mistake.

4. Light. Lettuce needs light. Don't cover it.

5. Time. Radish 5 to 7 days, pepper 14 to 21, parsley up to 4 weeks.

Seedling looks terrible

Normal, and not your fault. Roots were disturbed and can't keep up with the leaves. Most look rough for 3 to 7 days; some take two weeks.

Prevent it:

- Transplant in the evening or on a cloudy day.
- Water well before and after.
- Keep the root ball intact.
- Harden off for a week first.

After: water evenly, shade from hot sun, and hold the fertilizer until new growth appears.

Too many seedlings

Crowded seedlings fight over light, water and nutrients, and air. Thinning is how the rest thrive.

How: wait for the first true leaves, keep the strongest, and snip the others at soil level with scissors. Pulling disturbs neighbors.

Thin to (inches apart):

Carrots 2 to 3 • Beets 3 to 4
Radishes 2 • Beans 4 to 6
Leaf lettuce 4 • Head lettuce 6 to 8
Kale and chard 12 to 18

Carrot and beet thinnings are edible.

Tom Brownthumb started with four crops. Three of them worked. He planted seven the next year. That's the whole story of every gardener who stuck with it.

Tom Brownthumb planted tomatoes a week before last frost. Spring disagreed with him. The tomatoes did not survive the disagreement.

Wicket's rule for everything on this page: fix one variable, try again, and keep going. Gardening is mostly small experiments conducted in the dirt.

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