



GARDENING 101

HOW TO GET STARTED

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Friends, I am an unlikely gardener. I have killed a lot of plants in my life! For the majority of my existence, I didn't understand how people loved spending time with plants or getting their hands dirty. My mom and grandfather were always out in the dirt, but I just didn't get it!

But, I did, in fact, start a garden.

Or rather, it started me.

I get asked a lot of questions about this gardening thing (step inside Gracie's Garden here on Instagram) and let me first tell you: I am no Master Gardener. I'm just a gal who happens to think growing things is the greatest thing ever. I have learned a thing or two, and I love seeing friends discover that they can learn to garden—no previous green thumb required!

Lara ♥

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READ IT ONLINE

Read Lara's Gardening 101 blog posts, full of more photos, links, and stories from the garden.



[READ PART 1](#)



[READ PART 2](#)



[READ PART 3](#)



DEFINE WHY YOU WANT TO GROW THINGS

What kind of garden do you want to grow, and why gardening in the first place?

For food? If so, what do you like to eat?

For teaching? This is why I first started our garden. I wanted Grace to experience the miracle of growing things—from start to finish—and all the garden has to offer!

For fun? My grandfather loved growing the weird things: pineapple sage (we love growing it too!), huge tomato varieties, and unique hybrids.

For beauty? Maybe you love the idea of creating a garden space as an environment to enjoy.

For filling vases? We love growing several flower varieties just for cutting and sharing with neighbors.

For attracting butterflies, birds, and bees? This is why we plant zinnias—the pollinators that love them help to grow all of our veggies.

What is it for you? You may have one reason or 10—there are no wrong answers here. List your priorities and it will help you determine what to grow, and what not to grow.

Maybe you are living in an apartment and only have space for a few pots by the windowsill—that's great! Maybe you have just enough space for containers—that's great too. Maybe you prefer low-maintenance air plants or you only want a few great house plants—wonderful. Or maybe you don't like to eat veggies and you just want pretty flowers—that's awesome too! The bottom line here: use what you have, and use it in a way that's unique to you.



There are countless ways to grow a garden, just as there are many ways to grow an intentional life. There are kitchen gardens, vertical gardens, cottage gardens, raised beds, roof gardens, square foot gardens, window boxes, rose gardens, wildflower gardens, container gardens, terrariums, herb gardens, water gardens, butterfly gardens—and the list goes on. No two gardens are exactly alike. Imagine your life as a garden. Unique. Purposeful. Unlike any other.

LARA CASEY, CULTIVATE



FIND OUT YOUR GROWING ZONE

Like learning your Myers-Briggs personality type, this is very helpful information. Essential, actually. Knowing your growing zone will allow you to know what types of plants might thrive in your area in each season. This is like knowing the gardening language that allows you to read seed packets and plant labels. Most plant labels and seed packets have recommendations based on each growing zone. Look yours up here!



FIND OUT YOUR IDEAL DATE TO PLANT

And put that date on your calendar! This tip is going to help you cool your jets about gardening for a bit, and help you to plan well! Unless you live in Florida, it's not time to plant things in most parts of the country. You are not behind if you are just getting started on your garden dreaming—you have time. If you are going to garden outdoors, you'll need to know what the last date of expected frost will be in your city. Find out here. For us, the ideal date to begin planting is not until after Tax Day—April 15th! Now, let me tell you, I have ignored this recommendation several times. And every time I've regretted it. In our area, the weather gets lovely in late February and March is magical, and it makes everyone want to plant things right away. But, wise gardeners know to be patient. I've gotten over-eager a time or two and planted tomatoes in March only to have to dig them out before a freeze and give them a temporary abode in my kitchen. Be patient in planting, my fellow gardeners. You'll be glad you waited. You can also find a full list of exactly when to plant different varieties in your location on the Old Farmer's Almanac site.



DO A LITTLE GARDEN DREAMING

Knowing why you want to garden and when you can plant things in your area and zone, it's time to start dreaming about what you want to grow. We'll get more in-depth on this next (what grows well with what, etc.), but for now, start browsing seed catalogs and making your dream list. Grace and I did our Garden Dreaming a few weeks ago. We broke out all the seed catalogs (I love Park Seed, Burpee, Floret Flower Seeds, David's Garden, Renee's Garden, Botanical Interests, and the Southern Seed Exchange Catalog), and we circled and chatted and had a ton of fun making our dream list. Later, when we sketched out the garden (coming next), we paired down our list. For now, get garden happy and write out all the things you'd love to grow—what you would love to eat, share, or cut—depending on your answers to question 1.

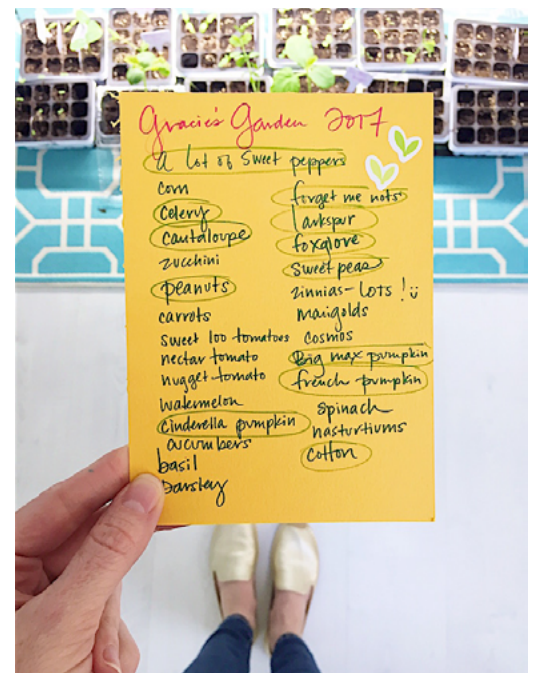


REPEAT AFTER ME

You do not have to know everything about horticulture to grow a garden. Every year, some things grow and some things don't! I still kill plants. I sometimes forget to water. I sometimes don't weed. And you know what? My garden still grows! Even though I am imperfect, I am a gardener.

(And for some reason, I couldn't help the tears typing those words.)

You can be a gardener, too, my friend. I'm excited for you!



5 key things to
consider when
starting your
garden



MONEY

You could buy a seed packet for less than a dollar and plant in the soil you've got if it's good soil. Or you could go with a few small containers to start. Or you could try your hand at a raised bed or two, which requires a bit more resources. Decide on a gardening budget that's comfortable for you. If you need to start small, that's okay! A little goes a long way, and you can always do more later! Gracie's Garden started with a few containers and grew over the course of five years. We now have over 40 feet of raised veggie bed space and lots of flower beds. Our garden space and plantings expanded over time, and over that time we learned to care for it all. Choose what works for you in this season of your life.

TIME

Growing a garden isn't just about planting things once and never having to touch them again. Depending on what you grow, there's a lot of ongoing tending that happens—which to me is the fun part! Planting our garden takes a few days, and tending and watering takes me about 15-30 minutes a day. Sometimes it takes much less time during a week when it rains, but there are also times it takes a lot longer, like when I need to prune. Consider the maintenance needed for certain plants. Tomatoes generally require staking and pruning, but they give you fruit over time. Carrots, however, grow, get pulled out of the ground once, and that's it!



The soil is what sustains the life of the plant, providing nutrients, and allowing deep roots to grow. Good soil is a gardener's gold. But, let me tell you right now, that "perfect" soil is not required. Here's a shortcut: call your local garden shop or garden extension service. First, ask them about the general soil in your area. Here in North Carolina, we have clay soil, which means that it doesn't drain or allow plants to root well. So, raised beds are a must for us. In areas of our yard where I've done in-ground planting, I've had to dig out mass amounts of clay first to replace it with looser "loamy" soil.

Whether you are planting in pots, or raised beds, or in-ground, you're likely wondering what kind of soil to use. A reminder: I'm no expert here, and that's why this series is titled Gardening 101!

Here are some soil basics. Plants need nutrients in the soil to grow, and when you grow lots of veggies and flowers, they suck the nutrients out of your soil. So, each growing season, you'll need to add nutrients back to the soil to keep everything happy. This is called "amending the soil." But, how do you know what nutrients to add? My farmer/gardener friends may cringe at this, but I don't test my soil every year. It's the only way to know what your soil needs, though. I found this test kit that I may use this year. Once you know what your soil is lacking, take a look at what you're growing and see what nutrients each plant needs (Do a quick internet search to find that info.)

Okay, let's talk dirt. If you are starting from scratch, what kind of soil should you use? Here are our two favorites:

1. A local grower's mix of organic mushroom compost, crushed shells and vermiculite (helps our soil to drain well), and organic topsoil. Lots of local nurseries and landscape supply places mix their own soil, so do a little research and ask around to find the best! This is the soil mix we started with in most of our raised beds.
2. Black Kow mixed with organic mushroom compost. Grace lovingly calls the Black Kow, "poopy cow," because.... well, that's what it is. And it just plain works. Every year, we (meaning me with Grace playing in the dirt while I do this) till up our existing soil with a big shovel and mix a few bags of poopy cow and mushroom compost into our raised beds for added nutrients. So far so good!

What about fertilizer? I haven't gotten into composting yet, so for now, I'm using traditional fertilizers. I sprinkle some 'MaterMagic in with my veggie plantings once they have had some time to root. I use Dr. Earth's fruit tree fertilizer for all the trees a few times a year, too, but the Black Kow mixed into the pots works just as well. For our bulbs, I use Jobe's Organics bone meal. If we plant beans, I use a nitrogen booster. This all sounds very complex, but so much of what you need to know is easy to Google and, many times, written on the seed packets!



Most vegetables need 6-8 hours of direct sun. My vegetable garden actually only gets about 5 hours of full sun, but somehow it still does well. One end of the raised bed area gets a bit more sun than the other, though, so I purposely plant the more sun-loving veggies there like tomatoes and peppers. On the shadier end, I have some part-sun flowers and creeping vines that like a little respite from the heat every now and then. If your garden spot doesn't get much light, you can still grow many leafy vegetables such as lettuce and spinach, but in general, the sunnier the better.



You don't need a ton of space to grow a garden. If you follow the Square Foot Gardening method, you'll be able to pack a lot in a tiny space. But, plants do need room to root and spread out. I made the mistake of planting too much in a small space my first year of gardening, and most of my tomatoes ended up pretty tasteless. Just like our lives, if you grow too much in one space, you won't have enough nutrients to go around. So, consider your space. Like I mentioned in Part 1, gardens come in all shapes, types, and sizes!

So, what are you going to grow? Let's look at that garden dreaming list you made from part 1. Considering the five keys we just discussed (money, time, soil, sun, and space), what on your garden dreaming list is a must-keep, and what needs to get crossed off for now? Another way to pair down your list is to do a little research to find out what will grow well in your zone and season, like we talked about in Part 1. This is very helpful info to have! I am purposely holding off on planting a few things till later in the season because they need more heat to grow (watermelons for instance). So, till then, I've got an open space in my garden that I can fill for a few months with carrots!

Widdle that list down to what works best for your particular garden, your season of life, and what you will enjoy most. Don't have enough sunny space for all those veggies on your list? Grow what you have space for. Don't have time to deadhead cosmos all summer (I learned this the hard way last year)? Don't plant many—or consider cutting them off your list altogether. Don't have the budget for raised beds this season? Start with a few pots! Or get creative and try these unusual garden planter ideas. My best advice is to start small. You can always add more later in the season—or in future years!

Seeds, supplies,
and sources for
your garden



MASTER GARDENERS

Numero uno on my list are the magical garden beings called Master Gardeners! Have you heard of Master Gardener's before? I did not know this service existed until just a few years ago when I was trying to figure out how to deal with the hornworms on my tomato plants, and I met one at a garden shop. Master Gardener programs (also known as Extension Master Gardener Programs) are volunteer programs that train individuals in the science and art of gardening. These individuals pass on the information they learned during their training, as volunteers who advise and educate the public on gardening and horticulture. Do a quick Google search to see if your area has this program—they likely do! I've met several Master Gardeners at garden fairs and local events, and they are a wealth of knowledge.



SEEDS

BURPEE (I have often ordered a few weird wildcard veggies from them like On-Deck Corn. We've grown it three years in a row and love it!)

FLORET FLOWER SEEDS (my favorite flower seeds and bulbs)

PARK SEED (another favorite for flower seeds)

DAVID'S GARDEN

RENEE'S GARDEN

BOTANICAL INTERESTS (lots of heirloom seeds)

SOUTHERN SEED EXCHANGE CATALOG (You must get a printed version of this catalog. It's so beautiful and informative!)



SUPPLIES

First, I love local garden stores! I do shop at some of the big box stores that carry locally grown plants (Lowes often has lots of local growers highlighted!), but there's something magical about going to the smaller garden shops. One of our favorites here, For Garden's Sake, even has goats, chickens, and alpacas that you can visit. Local garden shops are often run by passionate gardeners who get excited when someone asks a question or needs advice. Use the resources in your area—you might even make a new friend or two!

GREENES RAISED BED KITS—We have several of these and they come in all different sizes. SO fast and easy to assemble!

TOMATO LADDERS—These things are the best!

TOMATO CAGES

NITRILE-COATED GARDEN GLOVES—Great if you have roses or pokey veggies like cucumbers.

THE JOYFUL GARDEN PLANNER

I do have a few trowels and clippers, but I often end up using soup spoons, Grace's craft scissors, and my bare hands! You don't need fancy tools to grow a garden. And larger sticks from your yard make great tomato supports too!



GARDENING BOOKS

CUT FLOWER GARDEN by Erin Benzakein

SQUARE FOOT GARDENING by Mel Bartholomew

CARROTS LOVE TOMATOES by Louise Riotte—an excellent resource for companion planting

THE VEGETABLE GARDENER'S BIBLE by Edward C. Smith

THE REASON FOR A FLOWER By Ruth Heller—A favorite children's book I read when I was a child, and now read to Grace.



SEED STARTING

Depending on where you live, starting seeds indoors can help extend the length of the growing season for many plants. If you have hot summers like we do, it can give you a headstart on growing things that don't love the heat. And, it's just fun! We didn't start any seeds indoors last year because we were a little busy caring for two little new babies. But, this year, we jumped back in! This year, we started tomatoes, peppers, some zinnias, sweet peas, and pumpkins. After trying unsuccessfully year after year, we are determined to grow a pumpkin in 2017!

To start seeds indoors, you mimic the conditions needed for a seed to germinate and sprout outdoors: warmth, water, darkness, and once the seed sprouts, light!

You don't need a grow light like we have (we purchased this one several years ago and it easily stores away in our front hall closet when we're not using it) to start seeds indoors. You can simply use empty egg cartons, some plastic wrap, and a bright window. See this tutorial for more. And be sure to read this awesome post for more seed starting basics.





HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN RAISED GARDEN BEDS

I built two new garden beds last year that still look great—and all for about \$40 each. I went to Lowe's and picked out a couple untreated cedar planks, had the nice gentleman there cut them for me into eight sections—four 2-foot sections and four 4-foot sections. I got a small roll of landscape fabric, a box of 2-foot long nails, and I already had a 1-foot x 2-foot board at home that I sawed into eight sections to bolster the inside corners of my garden beds. I built the boxes in a similar way to this tutorial, then used a staple gun and attached the landscape fabric (helps keep weeds and critters out) to the bottom of each bed before placing them where I wanted them. I filled them all with soil, and that was that! These two beds took about an hour to construct.

Get this: a garden, by definition, is a planned space set aside for the display, cultivation, and enjoyment of plants and other forms of nature. And a gardener, by definition, is someone who tends and cultivates a garden. So, if you are growing plants, whether in a raised bed or a couple pots of herbs, guess what?

YOU'RE A GARDENER!

Whether this is your first year or your fiftieth, you are a gardener, my friend. You don't need to have a perfect horticultural record (I don't) or know everything about plants (I don't), and you don't need to have a huge "planned space." This is the beautiful thing about gardening and our lives: you don't need to be an expert or have a flawless growing history or be greatly experienced to cultivate good things. (I have an entire two pages in my upcoming book about all the plants I've killed as proof!)

SO, HELLO MY FELLOW GARDENER. IT'S NICE TO HAVE YOU HERE.

(Go, ahead... say it a few times to let it sink in: I'm a gardener. I'm a gardener. I am an imperfect excited plant-loving **GARDENER.**)



Garden planning



GARDEN STRUCTURE

Okay, so you know what you want plant, but where do you plant it all in your garden space? First, take a look at the different heights and sizes of each plant when they reach maturity. You'll find the height information for each plant on the seed packets and in garden catalogs.

If I were to put all the tall things in the front, the tall plants might shade the shorter ones—and I wouldn't be able to see the shorter things. If I planted something that grows on a vine, like cucumbers, in a tiny space with lots of other things, those cucumbers are no doubt gonna take over the space.

So, when I am sketching out my garden, I think about space and size of what I want to grow. A great garden structure is not only essential for plants to have room to flourish, it's visually appealing, helping you to enjoy the space more.

Make a list of the sizes and structures of what's on your list. Here an example from my garden plans.

TALL STUFF: tomatoes, corn, tall varieties of zinnias

MEDIUM: peppers, carrots, peanuts

SHORT AND SWEET: marigolds, small varieties of zinnias

VINES: cantaloupe, watermelon, and pumpkins need a spot in which I know they will be able to spread

SPACE SUCKERS: zucchini (our zucchini plant took over almost an entire 4-foot x 4-foot garden bed last year).

A NOTE ON HERBS: I keep all of my herbs in pots because some of them like to grow big and fast, and who needs more than a few sprigs of oregano every season? I also like having them as close to my kitchen door as possible for rainy or cold days when I need to clip something for dinner!

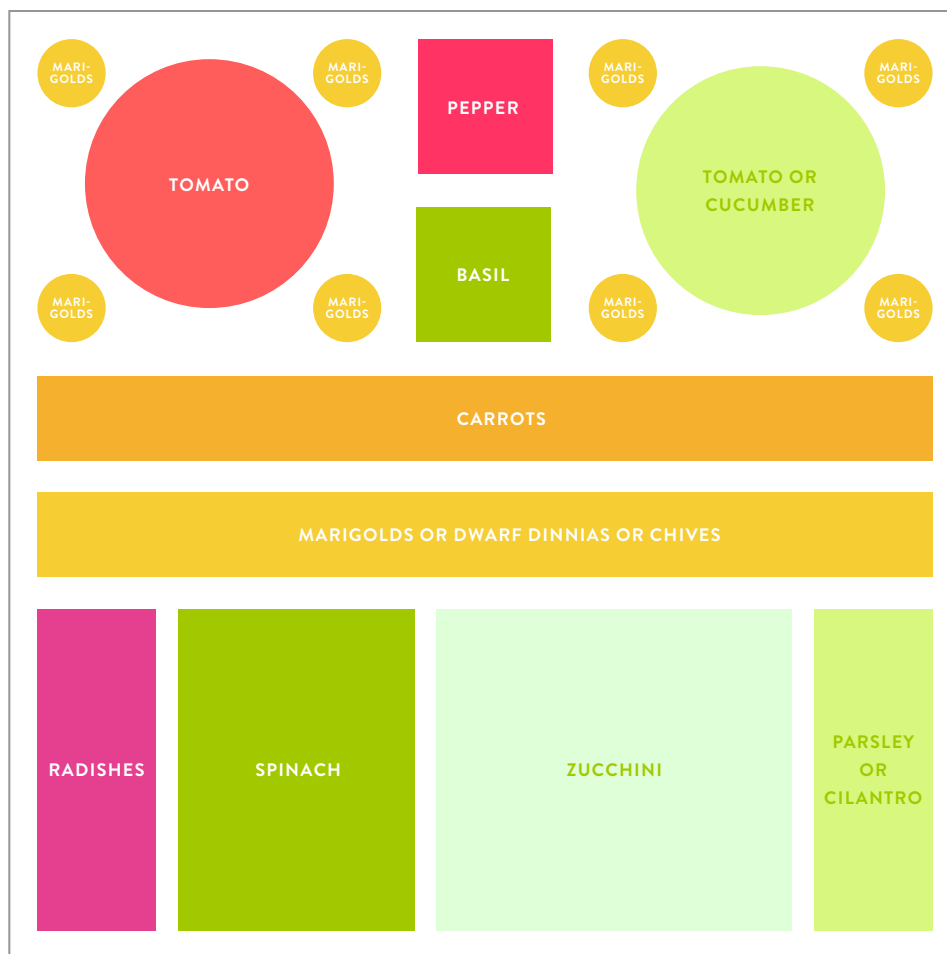




COMPANION PLANTING

If you want to get fancy, look up companion planting. Companion planting is like putting two great friends together to work for a common goal—two are better than one and can help each other to be more fruitful. I plant marigolds at the base of my tomatoes and peppers to keep pests away (and because they are so pretty!). I also pair carrots and tomatoes together.

If I was starting from scratch and had one 4-foot x 4-foot raised bed (or two larger trough planters), here's what I would grow and how I would arrange it. I hope this sample starter veggie garden plan helps to get your garden wheels turning.



I chose these plants because they grow well together. The shorter items are in the front with the taller items in the back. Be sure to give your tomato something to climb. If you choose the cucumber option for the back right, be sure to give it something to climb on, too.

What I love most about this sample garden plan is that it's packed with flowers too! Marigolds are a great companion to peppers and tomatoes, and they come in beautiful colors. You have an option in the center for either marigolds, shorter varieties of zinnias, or chives (if you like them).



GARDENING WITH KIDS

Gardening with kids is one of my greatest joys. Grace has learned so much from the garden! One of the best ways to create a kid-friendly garden is to think on their level (literally). What can you grow that will be easy for them to pick? What would you not mind them touching or plucking often (rose and raspberry bushes, for instance, are not a good idea)? What would they most enjoy nibbling on? We have a mint garden just for Grace to munch on, and it grows with zero maintenance. But, a word of caution: don't plant mint in your vegetable garden. It will take over and you will never be able to get rid of it! We have ours planted at the base of a tree in the front yard where it can spread out as it pleases.

I purposely choose to grow what I call “snacking tomatoes” like Sweet 100’s so Grace and Josh can pick and eat them. Herbs are also fun and totally harmless if your little one sticks a fistful of basil in her mouth! But, don’t do hot peppers within reach of little fingers and mouths. This all seems like common sense but it does take some forethought. If you want to get your kids to enjoy the gift of gardening, create a garden in which they can fully immerse their five senses—with nothing off limits.

Grace loves picking marigold petals to throw in the air in celebration, and I don’t hinder her from doing it. Grace also has a little “fairy garden” in one of the flower beds where she plays make believe, and Josh has a dirt patch that he loves to dig in. I let her water the plants, prune with her little craft scissors, pick, pluck, eat and dig as she pleases. And this is growing something wonderful in her—a love and gratitude for cultivating. This garden was meant to be a place of nourishment, play, and wonder!



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GARDEN PROGRESS!**

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