

Is It Time to Start Growing Your Own Food?

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The benefits of growing your own food include the enjoyment of fresh organic produce, getting exercise in the garden and reducing stress
- › Victory gardens were encouraged during WWI and WWII; some are again turning to gardening in response to COVID-19
- › Conventional farms are incentivized by profit: Many are growing crops to be used in processed foods. This potentially contaminates water and air and reduces biodiversity
- › The No. 1 rule for growing nutrient dense food is healthy soil; protect it by diversifying your plants, avoiding tilling and by covering the surface with cover crops or mulch
- › Quality seeds are essential. In small spaces you can grow your plants in pots indoors or on balconies and enjoy nutritious powerhouse sprouts all year long

There are many reasons more people are buying seeds and planting their own gardens. One of the main reasons is that you have control over growing your food organically and you can enjoy some of the freshest produce available. During World Wars I and II the government encouraged Americans to grow their own food to help the war effort.¹

These plots of land were commonly called "victory gardens," but were also known as "war gardens" and "food gardens for defense." During World War I, the new U.S. Food Administration was led by Herbert Hoover to regulate² "the supply, distribution and conservation of food during the war."

In response to the need for food conservation during World War I, Charles Chambers created a poster which was printed in several languages. The famous first line, "Food will win the war," was often quoted³ as it encouraged people to live simply and grow food.

World War II began a short 21 years later. Unable to maintain food distribution to the military and allies, against whom starvation was being used as a weapon, the government again turned to promoting victory gardens as they began food rationing. The campaign was successful throughout both wars.

History.com reports⁴ that in 1942 there were roughly 15 million gardens planted, which grew by 5 million in 1944. These produced approximately 8 million tons of food, accounting for more than 40% of the fresh produce eaten that year in the U.S:⁵

"Although the government's promotion of victory gardens ended with the war, a renaissance movement has sprouted up in recent years in support of self-sufficiency and eating seasonally to improve health through local, organic farming and sustainable agriculture."

Is It Time to Start Your Own Garden?

The interest in organic gardening at home has been growing, recently spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ This also may be a consequence of a growing understanding of the current food "war" we all fight against an industry that has flooded the market with chemicals and junk food.⁷

These tactics have driven rising numbers of chronic disease,⁸ health care costs and deaths as many are deceived about the long-term safety of processed foods. One law school professor calls this movement "GRAS-Fed Americans," in reference to the FDA category of "generally recognized as safe" (GRAS) foods that are not subject to approval as they are:⁹

"... generally recognized, among qualified experts, as having been adequately shown to be safe under the conditions of its intended use ..."

One of my consistent messages is that food is foundational to your health. Processed foods, filled with toxins, dyes and sugars, are a primary driver of chronic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death, causing about 647,000 deaths each year.¹⁰ Diabetes, one risk factor for heart disease, was the cause of 83,564 deaths in 2017, and it contributed to 270,702 more.¹¹ Both diseases are influenced by multiple factors, but mostly by metabolic dysfunction.

Without Pesticides: Homegrown Lowers Risk

Another risk to the food supply is from the thousands of gallons of pesticides and herbicides used on conventional monoculture farms to control pests and weeds. One in particular, glyphosate, the chemical foundation of the herbicide Roundup, is at the center of debate for more than 42,700 people who claim the chemical triggers non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

As of January 2020, Bayer has lost three jury trials,¹² but continues to contest the decisions, insisting — despite overwhelming evidence — the chemical is not carcinogenic.¹³

Politicians got into the fray, firing back at the World Health Organization that the claim glyphosate was "probably carcinogenic" was based on "shoddy work" as they sought to protect agrochemical business. International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) director Christopher Wild defended the results, saying:¹⁴

"... identifying carcinogenic hazards is a crucially important and necessary first step in risk assessment and management; it should be a 'red flag' to those charged with protecting public health."

With the slowdown in the court systems from the current COVID-19 pandemic, the manufacturer of the herbicide Roundup, Bayer, is slowing settlement talks. However, the plaintiff's lawyers deny the pandemic has had an effect on the negotiations, for which

there is ample technology to complete while maintaining social distancing and sharing documents.¹⁵

In addition, Bayer is revisiting law firms that had negotiated deals in place, demanding another cut. Mike Miller's firm currently represents 6,000 clients and he won two of the three jury trials.

He is concerned Bayer may negotiate a lower payout, taking advantage of the economic changes from the pandemic, as "These are uncertain economic times. People have to consider what's best for their clients."

The glyphosate court cases differ from other litigation, after which the drugs, devices or goods have a printed warning label or are pulled from the shelves.¹⁶ This makes future company litigation costs predictable. Instead, Bayer has never publicly indicated they would pull Roundup from the market.

Industrial Agriculture Is Creating a Risky Future

Like all business owners, farmers raising conventionally grown produce are incentivized by profit. However, as they use more chemicals with each passing year to control weeds and pests, this has had a devastating effect on streams and soil,¹⁷ impacting future crop yields.

The future isn't difficult to predict – more chemicals, soil damage and lower crop yields will not be profitable to the farmer, and they certainly have not profited the consumer to date.

Without access to organically produced food, you become dependent on the global industrial agricultural system, which has set its sights on short-term profits no matter the costs; the current legal battles with Bayer have brought this to light. These farming practices continue to impact the environment and food supply in several ways, including:

- Contamination and overuse of water^{18,19}

- Contribution to greenhouse gas^{20,21}
- Reduction in crop biodiversity²²

Wide Range of Personal and Community Benefits

One of the obvious benefits to growing your own food at home is reducing your risk of exposure to glyphosate and pesticides. When you plant your own garden you can also enjoy these benefits:

- **Improved nutrition** – Homegrown food is usually more diverse, flavorful and nutritious than processed foods bought from a store. Straight from the garden, food retains more of its vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.
- **Increased activity** – Physical activity, movement and exercise are part and parcel of tending to a garden and also important to maintaining optimal health.
- **Heliotherapy** – Exposure to the sun ramps up your vitamin D production; this is important to your immune health, as it improves your mood and exposes you to fresh air.
- **Strengthened environmental health** – Using organic principles, your food supply doesn't pollute the waterways, doesn't rely on transportation to reach the consumer (just walk outside and pick your vegetables!) and doesn't require fossil fuel to run the farm.
- **Stress reduction** – The authors of one Dutch study found that gardening after a stressful task reduced cortisol levels.²³ It also improves your sleep.²⁴

Basic Strategies for a Healthy Garden – Indoors and Outside

As you might deduce from the information above, the No.1 rule for growing nutrient-dense food is healthy soil. Whether you're growing your garden in pots or in the ground, as Gabe Brown discusses in this short video, there are five principles of regenerative farming you can use to develop healthy topsoil and build a healthy ecosystem:

- **Avoid disturbing the microbiome** – The less mechanical disturbance you use, the better. This means not tilling the soil and not using herbicides, pesticides or fungicides. Instead, seek out natural ways of dealing with pests and only open the soil enough to plant your seed.
- **Protect the surface** – Use cover crops during the winter months and cover the soil with untreated lawn clippings, mulch or wood chips during the growing season to feed the soil microbiome. This also helps to prevent water evaporation and lower the soil temperature on hot days.
- **Diversify your planting** – Cover crops help fulfill the requirement of using an array of plant life to protect healthy soil. If you have a large garden, you can alternate the areas where you plant your crops. If you're using pots, you can alternate the pots in which the plants are grown.
- **Keep living roots in the ground as long as possible** – Growth is key to soil vitality, so planting cover crops after you harvest helps improve soil diversity and health.
- **On a larger plot, integrate livestock and other living creatures, including insects** – Regenerative farmers use chickens, cows, lambs and pigs to help mimic the impact wild herds once had on the land. While you may not be able to keep farm animals at home, you can attract pollinators and predator insects by including flowering plants.

You Can Start Small for Big Results

You'll want to start with quality seeds for quality produce. Seek out a supplier who sells heirloom seeds that aren't genetically modified.^{25,26} This ensures you're getting the best plant possible and that these are better suited to organic growing conditions.

There are different ways to grow your food, even if you live in an apartment and all you have available is a balcony. One of the simplest and most inexpensive alternatives is to grow sprouts. These can be grown all year indoors. They grow quickly, which means you can harvest your nutrient-dense food in just about a week and they don't have to be cooked to enjoy.

Some commonly sprouted seeds are beans, nuts, broccoli, sunflower seeds and pea sprouts. Many of the benefits are related to the concentrated amount of nutrients in the initial phase of growth. These benefits include a higher vitamin, enzyme²⁷ and fiber content.

Purchasing fresh, healthy foods can sometimes be expensive, but sprouts don't fall into this category. When you grow them yourself the cost is significantly less than purchasing them from the store. I have found 1 pound of seed can produce more than 10 pounds of sprouts when grown in soil.

Sunflower sprouts have the most volume and, in my opinion, have the best taste. If you don't have much garden space, consider growing your garden in pots. Many of the vegetables and fruits you enjoy can be grown on your porch or balcony.

After choosing what you'll grow, take care to prepare your potting soil or garden carefully. You'll find growing instructions specific to your plant needs, including natural ways to reduce pest damage, in my "Ultimate Guide to Gardening."

Resources to Plant an Urban Garden

In 2011, Julie Bass of Oak Park, Michigan, faced a possible 93 days in jail after being charged for planting a vegetable garden in her own front yard. In five raised beds she grew squash, corn, tomatoes, flowers and other vegetables.

The city warned her to remove the garden when they claimed it violated an ordinance stating that only "suitable" plant material is allowed on the front lawn. In 2011, Ron Finley received a citation from the city of Los Angeles to clear his "overgrown vegetation" or purchase a \$400 permit for his garden. He wrote:²⁸

"Plus no one was being cited for the discarded old toilets, couches and used condoms on the street – but I got a citation for bringing nature, beauty, pride, art, and a sense of peace and calm to the neighborhood. It just made no sense."

It may be worth paying attention to the rules around urban agriculture in your neighborhood. It's important to educate yourself about your homeowner's association, city, state and federal ordinances before you start planting.²⁹ There's nothing fun about getting a citation, and there's even less fun in fighting it!

Since zoning laws and ordinances consistently change you need to do your due diligence in the winter months before you plant. Lawn and garden laws can include:³⁰

Regulations on fence and hedge heights, and length of grass	Restrictions on front yard food gardens ³¹
Watering requirements and limits	Regulations to protect wildlife
Regulations on weeds and invasive species	Farm animal ordinances, including beekeeping ³²
Composting ordinances	Regulations on rainwater collection
Gardening-related business activities, should you consider selling any of your produce	Hell strips – This refers to the land between the sidewalk and the street. By and large, this land belongs to the city, but must be maintained by the homeowner; oftentimes, you're not allowed to remove or damage plants or trees growing there

Sources and References

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