

Choosing the Best Place for Your Garden

6 easy questions – the first step to starting your garden

Don't let space, know-how, money, or mobility issues be the reason you don't start. Gardening can bring with it countless benefits. Your garden can give you something to look forward to, a creative outlet, a sense of accomplishment, an opportunity to learn and grow, a sense of connection, and an opportunity to destress. Let's start with where you'll grow your garden.

Indoors, Outdoors, or In-Between

You absolutely can grow herbs, flowers, and even some vegetables indoors or on your porch or balcony. This is perfect for people in apartments, people who like to stay indoors, people with mobility issues, and people who like to have plants all around them in their living spaces.

If you're planning to garden outdoors on a patio or deck, there are some incredibly attractive options for large patio containers including window boxes, pots and planters, waist-height garden boxes, and ground-level boxes that can help you design your perfect patio. You can even outfit these containers with wheels so they can be effortlessly moved around your patio. Boxes like these can be an incredibly convenient way to keep fresh salad greens, cherry tomatoes, or your favorite herbs in stock without the work of a full backyard garden.

Then there's the full outdoors, backyard-style garden. For so many homeowners this is the go-to garden, but don't let preconceived ideas limit your options. You can pick out a 50-foot plot in the middle of the backyard, border beds, a front yard garden, garden beds around the foundation of your house, or even a plot at your local community garden. Now, if you're going to go full outdoors, backyard garden, keep in mind that even small gardens or temporary boxes will disrupt the lawn, so spend a little time picking the perfect place.

Light

No matter where you plant your garden, it needs light. While there are specialized gardens that thrive in deserts, underwater, or in full shade, a vegetable, herb, or flower garden needs a minimum of six or more hours of full sun every day, eight is better. Watch how light and shadow hit the area throughout the day.

If you're indoors, you can supplement daylight with grow lights, but that won't work outdoors. Look for a nice, sunny spot. Without adequate light, your plants won't grow as well and won't be able to synthesize enough food to fuel a bountiful harvest.

Wind

Do you have an area that seems like a wind tunnel no matter the weather? That's not a great place for garden plants. Most backyards in urban or suburban settings in the U.S. don't have this trouble, but rooftops, balconies, hilltops, and places between tall buildings or hills can create very windy conditions.

Constant wind can pull moisture from the plant leaves faster than the roots can draw it up from the soil, leaving behind wilted and brown dry leaves. Even if the plant can keep up, it will grow slower from trying to limit water loss, and consequently its ability to breathe too. Wind can exacerbate freezing conditions, extreme heat, and drought too.

If your spot has windy conditions, you may be able to create a windbreak. Consider a netted windbreak cloth or fence, woven wood panels (made from willow shoots or rushes), or even cloches or greenhouses. Search for “prevailing winds” in your area to help you research wind conditions and compare with your own observations. Wind conditions can change with the seasons; you may need an adaptable solution.

Drainage

If you’re choosing a place out in the yard, be mindful of the low, spongy areas. If you have a place that turns into a lake every time it rains hard, that’s not a great place for your garden. Most garden plants do not appreciate soggy roots.

There are some things you can do to work with a swampy area if you need to, but it is far better and easier to choose a location that isn’t soggy. If the area is only sometimes or mildly affected, raised garden beds may be all you need, but you can take steps to improve your soil drainage or even install a drainage system as well.

Clean Soil

Unfortunately, urban and suburban gardens are at risk for contamination from pollution in the soil. It can help if you know how a plot of land was used before. Application of herbicides and pesticides on the lawn, lead-based paint chips or asbestos common in older construction, spilled or dumped oil or gasoline, residues from burning coal or garbage, or industrial contamination are all potential hazards in your soil.

Testing your garden soil is always a helpful practice for gardeners to determine pH, composition, and nutrient profile, but if you have concerns about pollution in your soil, you may want to have a sample tested for toxins.

While it’s difficult to “clean” your soil, it’s easy to work around this issue by using raised garden beds and filling with clean soil and compost.

Access

Before you start digging anything up, don’t underestimate convenience and access. You’ll want to ensure your garden is easy to get to and near a suitable water source, as well as your tool storage location. In many backyards, no place is particularly inconvenient, but in a larger yard or a community plot, the idea of carrying water up and down a hill or walking 5 minutes every time you forgot a tool or bin could be enough trouble to make your new hobby feel more like a chore. Choose a place you can comfortably walk or wheel to and around in. Usually, this will be a flat, level area, but it is possible to work with inclines if you need to by terracing raised beds on the slope.

This article is part of the series City Gardening 101 – a complete beginner’s guide to hobby gardening. You don’t need a giant plot of land or a ton of specialized tools to enjoy gardening. Whether in your backyard, your patio, or your windowsill, you can grow food, herbs, and flowers, connect with nature, and enjoy the fruits of your labor. If you’re thinking you’d like to try gardening, this is your time! Let’s get you started.