

How to Create a Sustainable Garden for your Family

By Jo Ellen Meyers Sharp



[Source](#)

Sustainability is a big word with lots of different meanings. A general definition: Practices that support our environment and ourselves. Few things are more sustainable than buying local, especially food.

You can't get any more local than growing your own food. Veggies add color, form, and texture to the landscape, and even though our pets are meat-eaters, there are plenty of grains and vegetables you can grow to sustain them in an emergency. These plants attract and support pollinators. Let's explore ways to create a sustainable garden for you, your children, and your pets.

Bed Prep

Vegetable garden beds should be in full sun. They can be in the ground or in raised beds. Raised beds are best in urban areas, where soil may be root bound or

contaminated with pollutants. A raised bed can be framed, or it can be a bed piled with planter's mix.

A Contained Garden



[Source](#)

Balconies, patios, decks, and porches are alternative spaces for growing vegetables. These are the places to pot up containers with colorful veggies. Use dwarf varieties or those recommended for containers. The key is using a container large enough to accommodate the plant.

The easiest way to get started is to buy an organic planter's mix. The mix contains soil, compost, rotted manure, and other organic material, making it perfect for planting. Once in place, moisten the planter's mix and allow it to settle a few days before planting.

What to Plant



[Source](#)

Notice your dog or cat digging in the garden lately? They may be craving the antioxidants, nutrients, or vitamins A, B-complex, C, or K found in wheat and barley grass. Your pet bunny will eat it by the handful. Spinach will give your dog a boost of iron and help him fight off any cardiovascular problems.

Melons



[Source](#)

Watermelon and cantaloupe will sustain your rabbits, guinea pigs, and yes, even your dogs. It's a great source of vitamin C, B-6, and lycopene. Cantaloupe is loaded with beta-carotene. You may want to remove the seeds before feeding these to your pet.

Look for colorful plants that are not only delicious, but also add beauty to your garden. [Carrots, orange and red peppers, and purple cauliflower](#) create a visually appealing garden. You should also choose [plants that are resistant](#) to insects and diseases.

Cats will nibble on cooked carrots and mashed broccoli. Both contain antioxidants that will boost their immune system. Contrary to a popular myth, avoid giving carrots to your

pet bunny. They contain a lot of sugar, and too many can cause digestive problems. Best to stick with lettuce and dandelions.

Sustainable gardening means little or no use of pesticides, insecticides, or herbicides. Disease and insect-resistant vegetable plants reduce or eliminate the need for these products.

- **Plant what you like.** If you and your pets don't like okra, don't plant it.
- **Plant foods you can freeze or can.** A stockpile of canned vegetables is the best way to [prepare for a disaster](#). Storing and preserving food for winter dishes extend the sustainability of growing your own.
- **Transplants or seeds?** Increase chances of success by planting transplants of tomatoes, eggplant, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and peppers. Sow seeds directly in the soil for squash, beans, peas, cucumbers, and potatoes.
- **Herbs help your garden grow:** To help with pollinating the vegetables, plant herbs, such as dill, fennel, parsley, and borage to attract birds, butterflies, and bees to the garden.
- **Harvest at the 'ripe 'time:** Remember to harvest vegetables as they ripen. Harvesting encourages the plants to keep producing.

When to Plant

The soil temperature is what determines planting times for vegetables. Veggies are divided into [cool-season and warm-season crops](#).

- **Cool-season planting:** The soil should be at least 40 degrees for planting cool season-vegetables such as peas, lettuce, kale, and cabbage.
- **Warm-season planting:** The soil should be at least 55 to 60 degrees F for tomato, pepper, beans, cucumbers, and eggplant.
- **Protect plants from the cold:** If frost or freeze threatens, cover young plants at night with rags, sheets, or other material, tenting it above the ground. Don't use plastic sheets.

Growing Sustainably

This is where commitment to sustainable vegetable gardening for your family is probably most important. You may be tempted to grab a spray to kill insects or control diseases.

- **Disease detector:** Know what you have before you treat it. Consider downloading [Purdue Extension's Tomato Doctor](#). This app helps identify insect and disease problems and makes suggestions on how to treat them..
- **Think green with insecticides:** Start with the least toxic way to take care of insects. A spray of neem oil or soapy water often gets rid of the bugs.
- **Select an organic or natural fertilizer.** Read and follow the label directions.
- **Conserve water in the vegetable garden** by installing drip irrigation or apply water using a showerhead nozzle to the base of plants.

Benefits of sustainable gardening

Growing a sustainable vegetable garden for your family takes patience, experience, and realizing there's not a lot you can do about the weather. The benefits are many: Fresh vegetables, preserved foods for winter, a pollinator friendly garden, and by getting the kids to garden, you'll have an easier time getting them to eat their veggies.

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