

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BUILDING A GARDEN

By Danielle Chapman

Maybe it's the memories of grandma's garden that have inspired you, or perhaps it's seeing how beautifully your neighbor's garden is growing with all its lovely lilacs, lilies or herbs. Maybe you've moved into a new home with lots of yard and you'd like to dress it up a little. Whatever the reason, and despite never having grown a thing, you're stepping up - you've decided to have a garden of your very own.

Where to begin?

First, before you spend all that money on garden gloves and funky hats, it's important to realize that although gardening is one of the biggest pastimes amongst the population, it is more than just a hobby - it is a passion. Most hobbies are for relaxation, requiring minimal effort, but this is a hobby that can require a lot of investment - not only of time and money, but labor. This is a hobby that will have you on your hands and knees and could give you an aching back after an afternoon of pulling weeds. However, the tradeoff is not only being able to commune with nature and develop a personal relationship with the earth, it's seeing the beautiful results you've created with time and effort that is all your very own.

So, if that sounds as good to you as it does to the millions of others who enjoy spending their time unwinding amongst the gladiolas, and you're undaunted by the idea of tending a garden even after a long day at work, then begin with the following:

Locate a good nursery or join a local garden club.

This is where you'll head for ideas, tips and advice. Books are a good idea, too, but talking to someone who has local knowledge will likely work better for you. Then you can get advice in all areas, from what kind of plants, pests and weeds are native to your area to picking out good tools.

Lay your garden out on paper.

You no doubt already have an idea in your mind of what you want to plant, but if you lay your garden out on paper and take it to your local nursery, a professional will be able to make life easier by helping to determine such things as choosing the right location for your garden and the proper amounts of sun and water that will be needed. An expert might also see something that may prove difficult and cause you major headaches in the long run, such as picking out plants that don't go well together or plants that don't grow well in certain soils or at certain times of the year.

Start small.

Going hand in hand with laying out your garden on paper is to start small. This will minimize maintenance and keep you from getting overwhelmed while you learn the basics. You don't want the garden to eat up too much of your time - this is the thing that frustrates most first time gardeners and prompts them to give up. When you've mastered how to handle weeds, watering and pests, then expand your garden's boundaries as you see fit.

Pick out good tools.

Do try to stay away from overpriced tools and gadgets. Since you're starting small - a definition that varies from person to person - you may need all or only a few of these tools: shovel, garden fork, trowels of different sizes, a hoe, pruners, a rake, wheelbarrow/cart, a water can and/or a good hose. Look for tools with steel blades and handles that offer comfort. You will also need to learn to care for your tools. Tools need to be cleaned after each

use and certain tools will eventually need sharpening or blades replaced. Tools stored for the winter require a protective coating of oil or wax before being put away.

Spend a little time in your garden everyday.

A few minutes here and there during the week is better than waiting for the weekend to tidy things up. We all know how life has a habit of getting in the way sometimes, making it difficult to keep up with anything - let alone a garden! Spend a few moments to snag a few weeds, water and keep an eye on your garden's progress.

As you and your garden get in tune with one another, here are some tips from the pros to keep the harmony:

- * Spend time watering your plants and encouraging your garden's roots to grow deeply by soaking the soil. Too short a watering time will keep roots near the soil surface.

- * Avoid clumps. Don't work soil that is wet. Overworking soil into a fine powder is also a no-no. Soil is supposed to have particles of different shape and sizes.

- * Try not to walk around in your garden too much. Creating rows in which to safely work keeps the soil around the plants from getting compacted and restricting growth.

- * Learn about compost. It keeps the soil healthy. If you can't make your own, there's always compost in a bag.

- * Use fertilizers sparingly, but use the right ones. Take a sample of your soil to your favorite nursery for testing to see which type of fertilizer you will (or won't) be needing.

- * Try not to go crazy with the pruners. True, fertilizers and pruning produce a more luscious and tender growth, but that's something bugs are extremely attracted to. The last thing you want is to have to spend time fighting battles with pests. This can turn your garden into a chore.

Gardening is a wonderful and peaceful pastime, if not addictive. Many will find the time to work in their gardens despite the whirlwind of activity going on in their lives because it brings them calm and order. Perhaps you are seeking that calm for yourself. Perhaps you feel the need to give back to the earth. Perhaps you are seeking that special relationship with nature that comes from having your hands covered in earth. Or it could be you just wanted an excuse to wear silly hats outside. Whatever the reason, happy gardening!