

Cooking on the Cheap: Snacking from Your Garden



Believe it or not, for me, one of the toughest parts about gardening is figuring out how to utilize the harvest. Often, I find myself sharing the abundance with others because I can't handle it all. When the determinate tomatoes set their fruit all at once, I'm overwhelmed by what to do with them all. When the cucumber plants produce more than I can eat in a week, I panic over how to use them up. A little bit of foresight goes a long way to fully utilize everything in the garden. Canning, dehydrating, and finding other ways to incorporate veggies in all my meals is one way to use up what I pick from the garden, but I don't always have time to plan and prepare foods this way.

Canning requires a fair amount of time, which I don't always have. Quick-pickling is easy and fun, but I couldn't possibly

consume all those pickles on my own!

I try to bake, roast, and sauce-up all the vegetables in my garden, but when the harvest is bountiful, that's not always enough to get through it all. It's taken a lot of practice to prevent waste, but it still happens. I've had to really sink my teeth into meal planning to maximize my returns and minimize wasted produce. Meal planning, in combination with crop planning, is the surest way to avoid disappointment.

Another way that I incorporate fresh vegetables into my diet is by snacking on them. By munching on raw (or cooked if you prefer) veg, I not only incorporate plenty of healthy nutrients in my daily caloric intake, I also use up otherwise tough to cook with veggies.

Garden Snack Ideas

Here are a few examples of snack ideas along with extra tips for using your harvest:

Celery: Whether I'm growing in the garden or snatching some up at the local farm stand, celery is one of my favorite veggie snacks. I love to eat it with peanut butter. If you get sick of snacking on celery snicks, use this veg for flavoring all sorts of dishes, including soups and stews.

Carrots: Who doesn't love a freshly picked carrot? Last week, I harvested a patch, and my dogs were close by, eager to delight in this sweet treat. Carrots taste great alone and are the quintessential healthy snack food. Zap them in the food processor if you're in the mood for a more substantial meal and make a carrot slaw for lunch or to accompany your dinner.

Tomatoes: When you think of a snack, you're probably not thinking about salads. But a plate of fresh sliced tomatoes, topped with salt, pepper, and bocconcini cheese is a gourmet-style afternoon indulgence. It's the perfect reward for

growing those delicious tomatoes, isn't it? Entertaining guests? Make cherry tomato skewers for easy one-handed eating.

Cucumbers: These taste great on their own with a little bit of salt and pepper. It's one of the only ways I enjoy eating cucumber – besides inside a sandwich.

Snap peas: If I'm not cutting these up to enjoy inside a stir fry, I'm eating them raw along with other fresh veggies.

Kale: Bake these low and slow for a few minutes or pop them inside a dehydrator to make kale chips. Adjust the salt content to your liking. Kale chips are a great alternative to regular chips loaded with saturated fat.

Berries: If you're lucky enough to grow any type of berry, boy, do you have a snack-worthy fruit on your hands. I've only started growing berries, so my patches are smaller than I'd like and only churn out a few strawberries at a time. How to enjoy a handful of berries as a snack? Eat them as is, or add them to yogurt or ice cream.

For the frugal gardeners, snacking doesn't have to be an expensive pursuit. Avoid costly, highly-processed foods from the grocery store and enjoy the tasty treasures sitting right in front of you!

What are your favorite ways to enjoy your veggie snacks? Tell me in the comments!

Next week, I'll be back with some meal planning tips to help you use what you grow, along with some suggestions of meal planning tools that I love and use frequently.

4 Reasons to Plant Flowers in and Around Your Vegetable Garden



For a long time, I thought planting flowers was a pointless and frivolous gardening activity. Sure, they looked nice, but I was much more interested in growing food. Being able to grow frequently eaten foods such as lettuce, tomatoes, and arugula, meant that my grocery bills were lower, and I was even able to share excess produce with friends and family. Growing produce is still the focus of my gardening efforts, but now, I put equal effort into cultivating a balanced ecosystem that includes flowering plants.

Why plant flowers?

Aesthetic: There's no denying that a patch of flowers around the garden looks beautiful. Well placed flowering plants pull together an outdoor space and really allow it to shine. A few containers of brightly colored gerberas on my back deck add a

look I couldn't otherwise achieve with simple greenery.

Attract pollinators: Flowers are an essential food source for many pollinators, and the colorful blooms will bring bees and other buzzing beneficial insects to the fray. Pick native flowering plants, and each time you step into your outdoor space, you'll notice that your garden is vibrating with energy.

Attract predatory insects: Some flowering herbs and plants also attract predatory insects that can help you take a bite out of pest problems – and even avoid them altogether. Catmint, for instance, attracts lacewing insects, which in turn devour pests such as aphids and Japanese beetles. The tiny flowers on this herb also attract bees.

Enjoy cut flowers for free: If you're anything like me, you love having a bouquet of fresh-picked flowers on your coffee table or kitchen windowsill. It's a beautiful way to bring the outdoors inside, but buying plants from a flower shop is an expensive purchase that most frugal gardeners aren't able to afford. Even those with a sufficient budget to buy cut flowers are wary of spending money on this type of expense. Planting flowers in your garden allows you to have a steady supply of cut flowers for your home. My favorite are zinnias. Start a few indoors, transplant in the spring and in mid- to late summer you'll be rewarded with a prolific patch of delicate and colorful blooms.

Annual versus perennial

Plant a variety of flowers including perennial *and* annual varieties to ensure you have a varied array of blooms. I like to cover the bulk of my flower-designated areas with perennials since they're low maintenance and don't require me to purchase new seed each year. I do enjoy planting a few annual varieties (zinnias, for example), though. Don't be afraid to ask nursery employees for suggestions on what to

plant.

When in doubt, pick drought-tolerant perennials, and you can enjoy a flowery display without too much effort!

The No-Cost Way to Increased Tomato Yields: Pruning



Hi, everyone! Apologies for the late posting.

I've known what I wanted to talk about this week for a while, but honestly, it's tough to explain it well without a visual aid. Pruning tomatoes is one of the tasks that I either excel at or fail miserably to keep up with. I'm either diligent in staking, pruning, and keeping my tomatoes organized and tidy

or I forget to stay on top of the chore and end up with sprawling plants.

Here's an excellent pruning guide to help you out with the task this summer:

Different gardeners have different pruning preferences. You can choose to lightly prune your plants or aggressively remove branches as you see fit. With a bit of trial and error, you'll find a method that works for you.

Why prune tomatoes?

There are a few reasons to keep up with this garden chore:

- **Prevents disease:** Let your tomato plants sprawl on the ground, and they're more likely to pick up disease from contaminated soil.
- **Improves air circulation:** This is especially true if you're planting things closely together (like I do with the Square Foot Gardening method).
- **Better yield:** If your tomato plant is busy throwing its energy into growing big, green leaves, you'll undoubtedly have fewer tomatoes. Pruning help re-route that energy to where it matters: growing big juicy tomatoes!
- **Controls growth:** Pruning prevents your plants from getting out of control, which allows for easier upkeep and maintenance. If your plant growth is left unchecked, foliage may shade nearby plants and completely block the sun for newly emerging seedlings. Pruning regularly also allows you the opportunity to inspect your plants carefully.

When should I not prune?

Don't bother pruning determinate tomato plants – these are varieties that set all their fruit at once. Pruning will significantly lower your yield.

If you don't feel like pruning, don't bother. There's no rule that says you NEED to. Sure, there are benefits, but you can also grow tasty tomatoes without the effort of pruning.

Dealing with Tomato Blight



I find it incredible that my garden can handle such intense weather variations. One week it's boiling outside, the next the temperature drops to a balmy 10 degrees celsius overnight. I'm grateful for the respite from the heat, but cooler, wet weather brings along a whole other set of problems, including tomato blight.

What is tomato blight?

Blight actually refers to a collection of fungal diseases that affect most nightshade plants (e.g., potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers). The condition advances rapidly,

turning leaves brown and leaving your plant looking like it's on its last legs. Blight can also affect the main stem of your plant and, in advanced stages, can even affect the fruit.

What causes blight?

There's a downside to cool weather, especially if the air is humid rather than dry. Plant diseases – fungi and bacteria – love damp, moist conditions.

Measures to avoid blight

Prevention is the best cure for any type of garden disease. To stop this fungal infection from spreading among your nightshades do the following:

- **Practice proper crop rotation.** If blight hits your plants this year, planting them in the same location will lead to a predictable outcome.
- **Avoid watering plant foliage.** Don't get the leaves of your plant wet. Water from below, instead.
- **Allow for adequate air circulation.** Space the plants appropriately and prune as needed to ensure your plants aren't squished together. Better airflow ensures that even after heavy rainfall, your plants won't stay humid and moist.
- **Keep leaves off the ground.** Trim and prune the bottom leaves of your tomato plants. If they fall onto the soil, they're more likely come into contact with a fungal infection.
- **Use supports.** Letting your tomato plants sprawl is the lazy gardener's way, but it's also an ideal way for your plants to contract blight. Use stakes or tomato cages to keep your plants off the ground.

What happens if my plants are already affected?

Trim off diseased portions of your plants. If the disease has spread too much and your plant is too far gone, remove it from

your garden. Do not toss it into the compost pile.

Fungicides are another option. I suggest opting for organic products. This solution is best when blight is caught early. Avoid relying on chemicals to solve problems like these. They may work in the short term, but prevention is the best way to avoid long-term issues and spending money down the line.

Gardening During a Heatwave



We're currently experiencing another heatwave where I'm located and boy oh boy does it ever make gardening a real chore. I'm incredibly thankful that our home is equipped with A/C, but when the temperature reaches over 100 degrees

Fahrenheit, I hate going outside even if I can cool down when I return inside.

We aren't the only ones suffering in the extreme heat. Pets are vulnerable during these scorchers, *and* garden plants suffer, too. I find it incredibly tough to go outside, but it's in this scorching weather that my garden needs me the most! When it's this hot, plants wilt quicker and need more water than ever. I have to water twice a day to keep them from withering away. I have to provide them with shade – even the plants that love the heat! It's simply too hot for anything to thrive. Production slows, as well. Blossom drop occurs, and I find myself harvesting fewer eggplants, tomatoes, and peppers. Bolt-resistant varieties of lettuce are not shooting up stalks like never before.

During a heatwave, there's plenty to do in the garden, even if I'm wary of stepping outside. Here are some tips to stay safe when gardening during a heatwave:

- **Drink water.** Don't just wait until you get back inside. You never know when a garden task might take longer than expected. Take a water bottle outside with you.
- **Garden in the early morning and late evening.** It may still be hot and humid, but at least you won't have to contend with the sun.
- **Save the heavy lifting for another day.** Unless it's a vitally important task, don't bother with sweat-inducing chores during a heatwave. Keep them for a cooler day. If you must do hard physical labor, avoid doing it during the hottest part of the day.
- **Wear a hat!** Even on cooler days! Keep your noggin' protected from harmful UV rays.
- **Slather on sunscreen.** Yes, even if you're only out for a few minutes. You may end up having a conversation with a neighbor finding yourself doing extra chores. Don't end up outside without sunscreen.
- **Take breaks.** It's that time of year when there's so much

to do. Harvesting, succession sowing, and turning the compost pile. You can't merely put those tasks aside because of the weather, right? That's fine. If there's stuff you need to do, just be sure to take periodic breaks.

- **Listen to your body.** Keep tabs on how you're feeling. Getting dizzy? Are you feeling nauseous? Head inside to a cooler area. Don't risk heat sickness or heatstroke.

Are you worried about your plants during a heatwave? Keep them watered and avoid watering when the sun is out (water will evaporate quickly, and wet leaves increase the chances of sunscald). Harvest at dawn or dusk to avoid stressing your plants. Harvesting in the heat will leave you with limp produce.

Watch the weather. Periods of severe heat and humidity are often accompanied by thunderstorms. Conserve water by strategically watering.

Remember, you can't control the weather! Don't feel like a failure if you incur losses during a heatwave.

2 Important Recent Gardening Mistakes: Lessons to Share



I made two serious gardening mistakes this season that I think are worth sharing with you all. One was a mistake that I shouldn't have made and another a simple error with significant consequences.

This summer has been tough for gardening. Things are growing, but the numerous heat waves have caused plants to struggle. Even the ones who love the sun and heat! This type of extreme weather already has me thinking about the future of my garden. Will I be able to plant the myriad of greens I typically enjoy planting in the spring ever again? The shortened spring and quick arriving summer weather made it challenging to plant some of the stuff I'm used to. Now, the heat is causing even my peppers blossoms to drop. I've already begun browsing seed catalogs to find heat-tolerant varieties of everything I like to plant.

Enough lamenting about the weather, though. Here are the two

mistakes I will aim never to make again:

1. Not checking nursery plants for insects

I was in such a hurry to plant and fill out my garden beds after a mass seedling failure that I bought plants without checking for pests that had already taken up residence. I was careful to throw away leftover seed starting mix after the seedling massacre because it's clear that something was contaminated. In my rush, though, I planted healthy veg without looking for hiding insects, and I suffered the consequences. My pest covers were working wonders until I introduced an already infested plant underneath. The cabbage worm population increased exponentially, so I've had to continuously head to the garden each day to pick them off and control the infestation. Thankfully, the kale has grown big and strong and can handle a bit of damage.

2. Leaving the pest cover open overnight.

I have another bed covered to prevent pests, but a few nights ago, I completely forgot to close it. Cabbage moths quickly found their way inside and had a party. Instead of having another batch of brassicas infested, I decided to pull up most of the kale in that bed and plant fall carrots, beans, and beets that won't succumb to these pests. I left a few plants, though, as sacrificial items that I hope might draw cabbage moths away from other brassicas. While this was a costly mistake that was preventable, I'm less upset about it. Because, honestly, sh*t happens in the garden and all you can do is shrug it off and find a way to deal with or make the best of it.

Which pest is giving you a hard time this year?

Have you had the problem before and do you intend to plant the vegetable again next year? Why or why not? Leave a comment and tell me about it!

Watering Tips to Avoid Waste & Unhappy Plants



Think about the last time you were severely dehydrated. You probably felt sluggish. Maybe you also had a pounding headache. Overall, it's not a fun experience. A garden probably feels the same way when it lacks water. Like humans, plants need H₂O to survive and can't live long without hydration.

Over the years, I've learned a thing or two about best watering practices, but I've also managed to create my own routine. I know some gardeners who prefer to irrigate their beds. Others prefer to use sprinkler systems. The watering method you choose is entirely up to you.

I use a hose with multiple nozzle settings and use a gentle spray to water my vegetable plants. I like the multi-function

nozzle because I can use it for other outdoor tasks (like bathing my dogs, which they hate with a passion!). My hose is expandable and ultra-long, so I can reach every area of my garden without struggling or hauling around a bulky accessory.

It's important to me that I water carefully and considerately to prevent waste. Water is a precious resource, after all.

Here are a few tips to keep your thirsty plants happy while avoiding waste:

- **Water in the early morning or late evening.** It's incredibly pointless to water once the sun is high up in the sky. The strong rays will quickly evaporate lingering moisture on the topsoil and you run the risk of burning foliage. Little droplets that sit on leaves turn into magnifying glasses that will intensify the sun's heat and damage plants. It's also just a lot more pleasant to water when the temperatures are bearable, and the sun isn't beating down on you. Your city may also have special rules about watering times. Watering outside of those hours (usually morning and evening) can get you into trouble.
- **Water from below.** Getting leaves wet won't always cause problems, but you increase the risk of disease occurrence and pest activity. Water from below is also more effective since plants typically draw moisture via their roots.
- **Mulch. Mulch. Mulch.** Heavy mulching has been a game changer for me. For a long time, I struggled to keep my plants well watered. The topsoil would dry out rapidly, and I'd be left with a desiccated wasteland. When I started mulching around the base of my plants, I discovered that I could conserve moisture, water less frequently, and keep my plants happy. Now, I'm never

without mulch on hand. I typically use straw, wood chips, or coco coir to mulch my plants.

- **Check in with Mother Nature.** Check the weather forecast and keep track of how much it has rained. It's entirely unnecessary to water your garden if there was a rainstorm the night prior. We're having a rainy summer this year, and I've been carefully monitoring the forecast to ensure I don't double water for no reason. Letting Mother Nature do the work gives me a nice break once in a while, too.

Have you added mulch to your garden? If you haven't, I guarantee that this step will change your frugal gardening life! It's well worth the initial effort. Don't forget to check the weather for this week and plan your watering schedule accordingly.

3 Vegetables You Can Use from Top to Bottom



Avoiding waste at all costs is extremely important to me as a frugal gardener. Throwing away parts of a plant that I might be able to use is akin to throwing money in the trash!

Now is the time of year where I'm in full harvest mode. I also receive a weekly CSA farm basket to satisfy my veggie cravings. I rarely meal plan at this time of year because I need to be able to get creative and think on my toes as I pick what's ripe in my garden and dig into my organic farm basket. Most recipes simply don't use all the parts of a plant, so I need to think outside the box when it's time to cook dinner.

Here are 3 plants that you can eat from top to bottom:

Beets

Sure, you know that you can eat the root portion of this sweet and earthy vegetable, but did you know that the tops are edible, too? Don't toss them out! After harvesting, separate

the tops from the roots and wash both parts of the plant thoroughly to remove dirt. Beet greens are very similar to swiss chard and taste great sauteed.

Carrots

They're not particularly flavorful, but the tops of your carrot plants are definitely edible. Use them to make carrot pesto or as a garnish for heavy dishes. In the late fall, you can harvest the tops of mature carrots before the roots, since the tops are a lot less cold hardy.

Kohlrabi

An alien-looking root vegetable that has a mild turnip-like flavor. I much prefer kohlrabi to turnips, actually! The bulb can be shredded and used raw in a salad or cubed and roasted with other root veggies. The leaves are fair game, too. Cook them together or separately, or use them like you would cabbage leaves and stuff them with whatever you're in the mood for.

Plants you *can't* eat from top to bottom:

Oh how I wish I could eat every plant from root to stem, but not all plants are wholly edible. Only eat the fruit of **tomato** plants, the rest might make you sick. Don't bother eating **squash** foliage, it's not at all tasty. Avoid eating **rhubarb** leaves, they're poisonous!

Do you have a favorite unconventional plant part that you love to cook with? Let me know by leaving a comment!

Knowing When to Harvest Garlic and Potatoes



I love this time of year! It's truly when the garden looks best. Everything is bright green, there are pops of color here and there, and I'm harvesting things consistently. It feels like the garden is alive. Harvesting kale and other greens is a breeze. I can easily spot when a tomato is ripe for the picking, and I pluck peppers off their stems whenever I feel they're big enough for eating.

Root vegetables like garlic and potatoes, however, are a little more challenging to figure out. While they mature underground, we're left to guess what's going on. It drives me crazy. I'm always tempted to dig a little to see whether my root veggies are ready to dig up, but I know from experience that my excitement often leads to disappointment. Patience is required, and digging in the dirt too soon can harm the

productivity of your plant. So how do you know when it's time to start pulling up those tubers?

When is garlic ready to harvest?

Planted in the fall, garlic requires a long period in the ground before it's ready to pluck from the ground. The first sign that garlic is growing going well and that your plant is nearing fruition is the appearance of garlic scapes. The curly stems shoot out from the center of the plants and signal that the garlic plant is ready to bloom and send out seed from its flower stalk. My garlic scapes have already started to appear, and they'll be cut off soon and enjoyed in salads and stir-fries. The scapes have a delicate garlic taste that's really out of this world.

The scapes appearing doesn't mean it's time to harvest yet, though. Cut the stems to ensure that energy is routed to the garlic bulb. A few weeks later, your garlic will likely be ready. The surefire sign that it's time to dig up bulbs is when the tops yellow and fall over.

When are potatoes ready to harvest?

The same goes for potatoes. Not too long after your plants begin to bloom, you'll notice the tops start to wilt, yellow, and fall over. It's a sign that it may be time to dig up the taters underground. Not sure whether it's okay to go ahead? Gently dig into the earth to check for appropriately sized tubers.

A tip: it's possible to dig up potatoes early. These small tender tubers are called 'new potatoes.' They're not quite mature enough for storage since the skin is typically quite thin and easily pierced, but they're excellent for cooking straight away once harvested.

I hope this helps ease your root vegetable anxiety. I know it can be hard to trust the process going on underground, but

it's well worth a bit of patience.

Happy Canada Day to all my fellow Canadian gardeners!

Adventures in Soil Testing



Summer has arrived at our doorstep. The temperatures are heating up, the sun is out in full force, and the garden is filling out nicely. I'm continually finding things to do, even though the main planting period has passed. Now, it's all about maintenance and succession sowing. I check on the garden each day to ensure everything is going smoothly.

Recently, I noticed the plants in one of my raised beds weren't looking too great. The leaves were yellowing, and the

entire box full of veggies looked stunted. What was going on?

Don't Make Assumptions

When I noticed the yellowing and weak growth in my plants, I examined everything a lot more closely. I could have assumed there was a deficiency or disease, but making assumptions is the last thing you want to do when diagnosing a garden problem.

I checked the undersides of the plant leaves. The bed contains mainly brassicas (e.g., kale, Brussel sprouts, cabbage) so I checked whether there was any pest damage. The bed was covered by netting, but you never know! A pest might be able to find its way in without your knowledge. Next, I checked the moisture level of the bed compared to the others. Each bed had similar moisture levels, so that wasn't the problem.

It had nothing to do with sun exposure since all the beds get the same amount of sunshine. Did I accidentally plant poor companions next to one another? Nope.

The yellowing and slow growth seemed to affect all the plants in the bed, so I figured disease was not the issue. It must be the soil!

Nutrient Deficiency

Uh oh! It looks like I was dealing with some type of soil deficiency. The three main macronutrients required for plant growth are Nitrogen, Phosphorus, and Potassium (NPK). Without a soil test, there's no way to know which one might be lacking. At least, not for sure.

Attempting to fix the deficiency without accurately diagnosing it can lead to a lot of problems and can even potentially contaminate your soil and cause environmentally damaging runoff. And if there's no actual deficiency, fertilizing for no reason is a complete waste of money. So before you run off

to the store to buy fertilizer, compost, or some other amendment identify the problem first.

Soil Testing

I know that many U.S. states offer soil testing services, but where I'm located, there's nowhere for me to send a sample. So I decided to purchase a soil testing kit from Amazon. It was relatively inexpensive and allowed for multiple rounds of testing.

First, I tested the pH of the soil in two boxes. The wrong pH can prevent plants from absorbing certain nutrients. The result? The pH in my boxes is around 6.5, which is just fine and preferred by most vegetable plants.

Next up, I tested for NPK in my problem box. The results surprised me. It turns out the soil in that box was deficient in Nitrogen. Now, I've started to try to fix the issue using organic fertilizers that are high in nitrogen. Had I misdiagnosed the problem and added Phosphorus and Potassium without first testing the soil, I might have contaminated my soil and caused further issues down the line.

The moral of the story? Test your soil!!!

To be fair, it would have been smarter to test the soil at the start of the season and address any imbalances then. I intend to make early springtime soil testing a habit!