

How To Garden Frugally

Gardening is an incredibly rewarding hobby, but it can get mighty expensive if you're not careful. Leaving things to the last minute then panicking and buying pricey supplies is something I've done as a gardener. Improper planning may leave you with a space that's not functional and needs revamping soon down the line. The good news is that it's possible to garden even while pinching pennies. Anyone, including those on a budget, can enjoy this fulfilling hobby.

So, here is a helpful list of suggestions and tips for getting the biggest bang for your buck as a gardener. Feel free to pick and choose the frugal gardening advice that suits your needs or go ahead and try to put all the information into practice and avoid shelling out a single dollar. Whether you're just trying to save a few bucks as a gardener, or you're looking for a challenge, keep reading for ways to spend less on your garden.

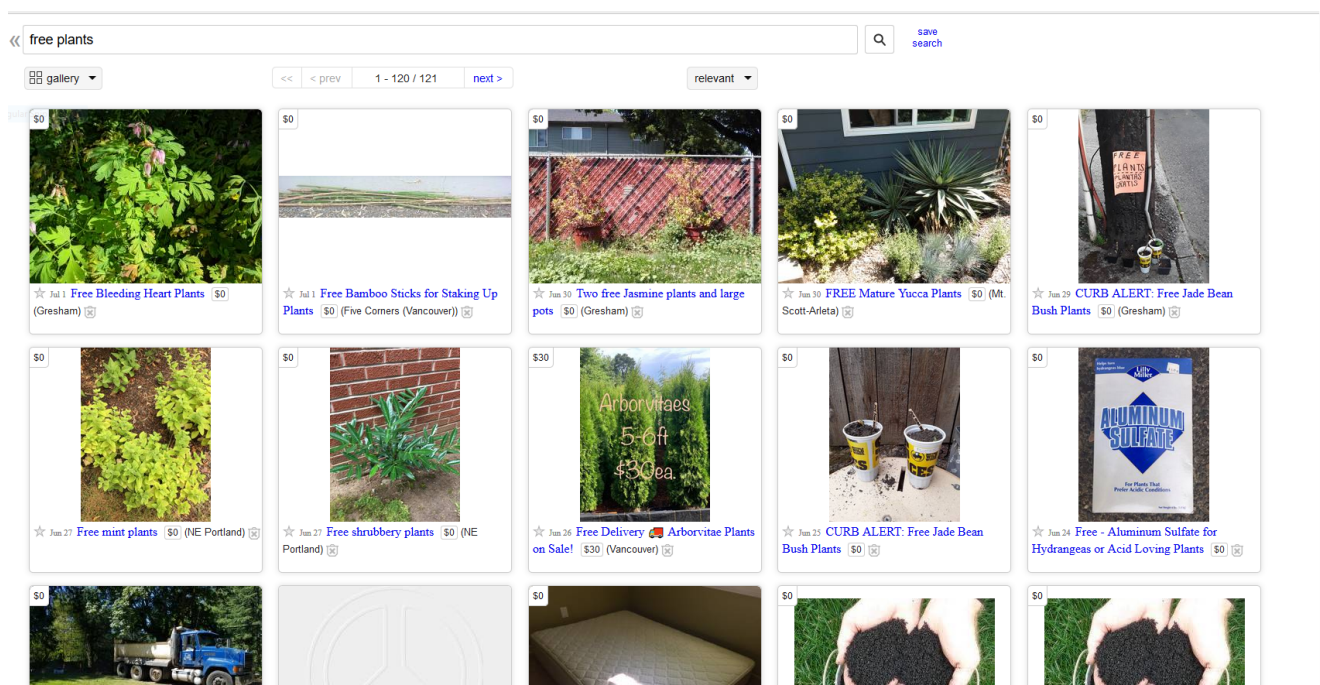
Source Free Plants

You can't have a garden without plants, but plants are so much more fun to look after than a boring grass lawn. The price of plants adds up quickly, however. While sometimes it's a nice treat to purchase fun, exotic plants from a local nursery, it's infinitely cheaper to source free plants. Here are a few ideas of where to look for free plants to add to your garden.

Online

Check craigslist, Facebook marketplace, or garden-related message boards to find folks willing to give away plants. Recently, I checked my local online marketplace and found hundreds of listings offering free plants to anyone interested, this works. If you're lucky enough to find a

vibrant online gardening community, you may even find folks willing to mail you cuttings. There are a myriad of gardeners on Instagram and elsewhere who are eager to swap and give away their excess seeds. Here is a screen capture of my local craigslist after I searched for “free plants”.



Call your local nursery

Wondering why on earth this would be on the list? You're right to be a bit confused. But your local nursery might be the perfect place to source free plants. At the end of the gardening season, there are inevitably plants that aren't sold and end up bound for the compost heap. Inquire whether your local nursery would be willing to part with their soon-to-be trash plants.

Look for leftovers

Companies that perform landscaping and gardening services may end up with a surplus of plants on their hands after a specific job. Offer to take those leftovers and use them in your own garden.

Friends and family

Know other people who love to garden? Ask them to share their cuttings, seedlings, and perennials with you. If you lack the space to start seedlings, but your friend or family member has a large indoor grow space, consider asking them to start a few plants for you. In return, offer them up some of the resulting produce. Its a pretty easy ask for dirt or a seedling or two.

Contact other gardeners

A community garden is a perfect place to find free plants. Folks often bring plenty of plants to the space only to realize that they've run out of room. You may find plants left behind with a note that lets you know they're up for grabs. IChat with other gardeners to see what they might be able to share with you. Meetup.com is a pretty solid place to find fellow gardeners, so is freecycle.org.

Bug your neighbors

Always eying your neighbor's beautiful peony plant? Consider heading over for a visit to chat about gardening and potentially dividing some of their plants. You may leave with a few new plants and a new gardening friend in the process. You might also meet people through your church or other civil groups.

Don't throw out your volunteers

My favorite source of free plants is volunteer seedlings. Every year, I spot a few surprise sprouts that self-seeded in my garden. This year, I was treated to a gorgeous array of speckled lettuce. Instead of plucking the randomly seeded lettuce to make room for the [carrot seeds](#) and spinach I had intended to grow, I let the lettuce grow and planted around it. Volunteer seedlings don't always pop up in the most convenient of places, but once they sprout, it's almost a given that they'll grow into super healthy plants.

Seed saving

I love buying new varieties of seed for my garden, but the cost of purchasing packets adds up rapidly. Try your hand at seed saving to minimize the amount you spend on seeds each year. It's an excellent skill for any gardener to learn. While some seed varieties are easier to save than others, growing plants from seeds you've carefully collected and preserved is really a treat.

Plant Smart

I know that the idea of starting a garden is so exciting. Each year when the gardening season approaches, I feel giddy. But jumping into things without a bit of planning is a no-no. Here's what to keep in mind before getting started to ensure you don't go over budget.

Plan before you plant

Sketch out your garden layout, think about what you need and where you might be able to get it for free. A bit of patience may mean the difference between an expensive project and a frugal one.

Choose your location wisely, too. The wrong spot might leave you with a garden that's too shaded or turn your space into one that's neglected over time.

Plant perennial varieties

My absolute favorite ways to save money as a gardener is to pick plants that offer exceptional value, and perennial plants are the way to go if that's your goal. Perennials return each year, so there's no need to purchase or plant them again. A one time buy turns into years of food production or beautification. I especially love planting perennial flowers.

Start small

You don't need a vast space to garden, and if you're on a budget, there's no reason to neglect this hobby entirely. Instead, opt for a container garden! You can grow plants in almost any type of container. How much you spend depends entirely on your vision and budget. A container garden is easy to maintain, perfect for beginners, and plants can be moved around easily.

Start seeds indoors

Starting seeds yourself can be a frugal activity or a costly enterprise. With a bit of ingenuity, you can start seeds indoors without spending too much. Grow seeds in DIY containers, you don't need special equipment. The bulk of your money should go to buying a quality seed starting mix. Check out our 'seed starting on a budget series' for detailed information on how to start seeds indoor on the cheap. Plus, starting seeds is a great activity for kids or families.

Plant high-yield crops

Plant vegetables, fruits, and herbs that are big producers. Cucumbers, tomatoes, squash, kale, lettuce, are all excellent examples of high-yield crops. These plants keep producing throughout the season and typically leave you with plenty of produce for your dinner plate. Opt for cut-and-come-again greens (e.g., leaf lettuce) and avoid sacrificing too much space for one-stop-shop plants (e.g., cabbage).

Grow pricey produce

Head to your grocery store and find out what the most expensive vegetables are, then list them out. Narrow down the list by crossing out anything you don't enjoy eating. Focus on growing those vegetables. Where I live, kale is really expensive, so even though I love to eat it, I don't buy it very often. This summer, I planted more kale than I've ever planted before. I won't need to worry about the high price tag of this brassica any more thanks to my smart planting.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

If you're not doing these three things, can you really call yourself a frugal gardener? When throwing things away (even in the recycling) question your decision and ask yourself, could I use this in my garden? Don't become a hoarder, but make intelligent decisions when it comes to the waste you produce.

Make your own compost

Find out if your town provides citizens with free compost bins, if that's not the case, bins from the store are relatively inexpensive, or you can build your own. A compost bin or pile is a must-have for any home gardener with the room for one. Toss scraps, raked leaves, and grass clippings into the bin and wait a while to use your very own homemade compost in your garden. Using compost to nourish your plants builds soil health and is much cheaper than buying bags of it at the store.

Free compost

No space for a bin or pile? Or maybe you just don't feel like bothering with this process? No problem. You might be able to find local farms willing to give away compost for free or for a minimal fee. Many cities and towns that have a curbside compost collection also give back to citizens by providing them with free compost once again around the start of the gardening season.

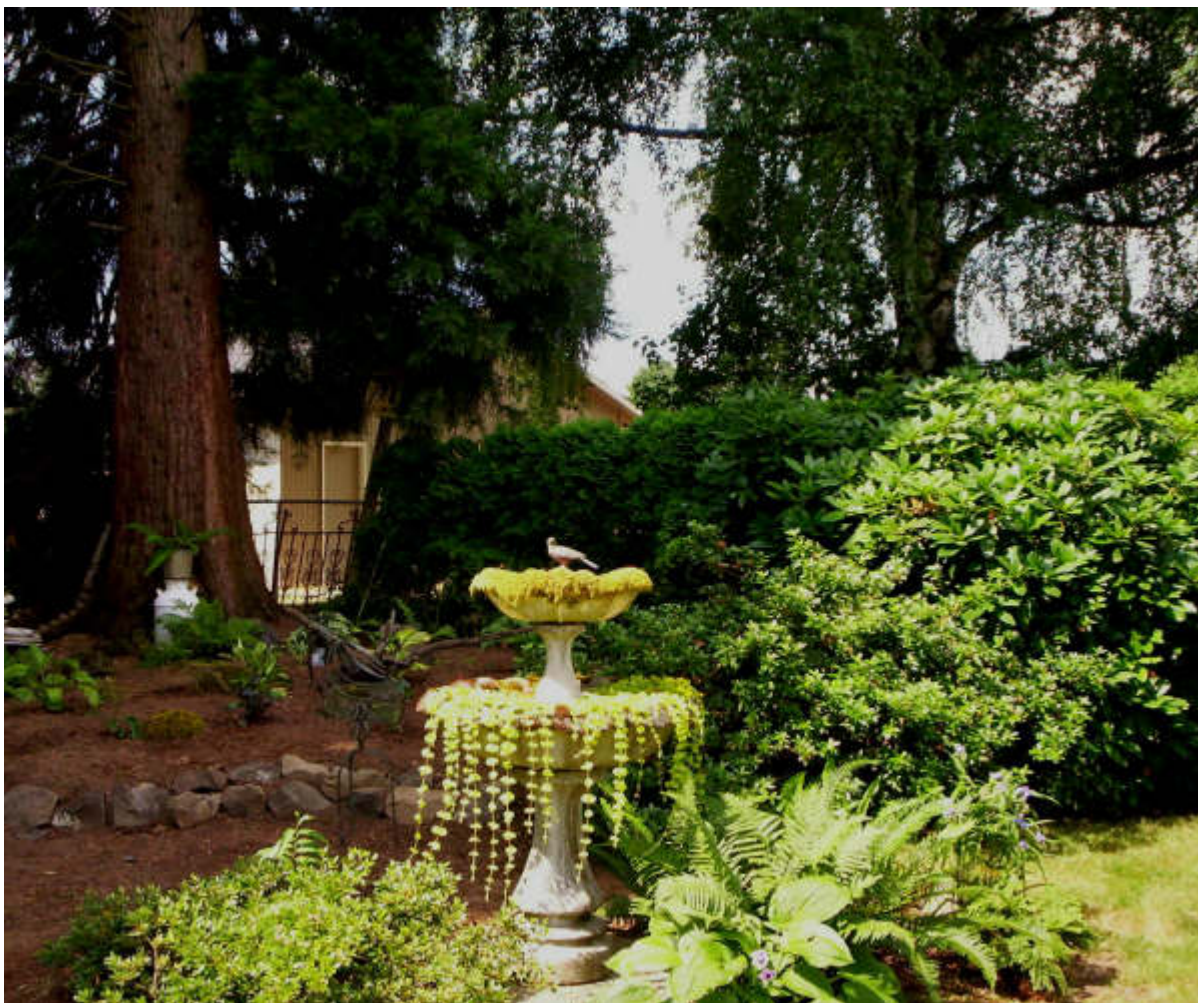
Free dirt

Once you notice the amount of free dirt available, you'll see it everywhere around town. People digging up their yards to put in pools or extensions on their homes are left with piles of unsightly dirt. It's not going back into the ground, so many people offer it up for free to whoever is interested. Get a shovel and borrow a friend's pickup truck and head out to

get yourself some dirt. While it may not have the perfect nutrient composition, it's a great filler option and can be mixed with compost and other ingredients to create a quality soil mix.

Use creative containers

I once grew potatoes in small blue recycling bins. I had no more garden space left, and I wasn't about to throw away my recently purchased seed potatoes, so I got a bit creative. You can grow plants anywhere. The limit is really your imagination. No more ground space? Install gutters and fill with soil mix to grow vertically. Your broken wheelbarrow doesn't need to get dumped in the trash, use it to plant a bed of flowers. In fact, here is a fun picture of an old birth bath that was transformed in a decorative garden piece.



Keep up with the harvest

Don't forget to harvest or you'll let all that hard work be for nothing. Timing the harvest is an art. Certain plants are ready before others, some need to be picked quickly to prevent overweening, and some plants need to be harvested before hungry garden critters get their first bite. If you keep up with the harvest, you'll ensure that nothing goes to waste.

Go hunting on garbage day

I love going on a run or walk on trash day. I always spot something interesting in someone else's trash on my journey. Old windows are a perfect DIY cold frame solution. A discarded patio trellis is ideal for vertical gardening. A few weeks ago, I stumbled upon a massive pile of empty plastic plant containers in someone's recycling pile. I snatched them up, stacked them, and walked home looking like a Dr. Seuss character.

Build from scratch

It's not always the least expensive option, but if you plan and price your materials carefully, you can save a ton of money, especially when it comes to building raised beds. Ready-built prefab options are insanely expensive, and while building boxes yourself takes a bit of DIY knowledge, you can pinch pennies and build your garden to match your exact vision.

Hyper-locally sourced mulch

Use what you can find to mulch your plants and conserve moisture. Don't throw all those precious fall leaves into the compost! Grind them up and use them as mulch. Look for local farm listings that may offer free or low-cost straw bales (straw makes for excellent mulch).

Use a rain barrel

Conserve water and collect rainwater. Use the water to satisfy

your thirsty plants.

Trade with others

Make some gardening friends, and you'll always have someone to trade with. You might even get introduced to unusual plants along the way. Trade seedlings, seeds, and full-grown plants. Swap produce, too. If you have an abundance of cucumbers, find someone who didn't plant any and get something you've neglected to plant in return. Trading has the added benefit of improving your gardening knowledge.

Don't know anyone who has a garden? Offer up fresh garden produce in exchange for a delicious home cooked meal ☺

Save Money with Eco-Friendly Solutions

Mass produced chemical fertilizers and pesticides are an attractive solution for pest problems and nutrient deficiencies, but they have their drawbacks, including their price tag.

Test your soil

Before you even put an ounce of fertilizer into your soil (organic or otherwise) TEST YOUR SOIL. Feeding a non-existent deficiency is a recipe for disaster. You can create a nutrient imbalance in your soil, harm your plants, and potentially cause chemicals to leach into the surroundings and go on to contaminate the soil and water. Don't make the mistake of contaminating your soil as this will be costly to fix down the road.

A good way to do this is test your soil with vinegar – if it fizzes, you have alkaline soil with a ph between 7 and 8. You can also test your soil with baking soda. To do mix a

tablespoon of soil with distilled water until muddy. Then add baking soda. If it fizzes, you have acidic soil. If your soil doesn't react to either test, you have neutral soil.

Use organic fertilizers

Natural amendments like compost are the ideal way to feed the soil and improve soil health over time. Natural fertilizers are less concentrated than non-organic options, so you're less likely to cause a nutrient imbalance by over fertilizing. Use homemade compost for a free organic fertilizer option or try something simple like this grass clipping recipe:

- Get a 5-gallon bucket and fill it 2/3 of the way with fresh grass or weed clippings.
- Fill the bucket with water to the point that it covers the grass with an inch or two of water
- Let it sit for for 3 days at room temperature. Stir the mixture at least once a day.
- After three days, strain the liquid and dilute it with equal parts of water.

Weeds like horsetail, Nettles, burdock, or chickweed are good examples of weeds that make excellent homemade organic fertilizer.

Rely on organic pest control solutions

Chemicals might quickly kill off pests, but there's a real concern that pesticides cause health problems and environmental damage. Instead, consider organic options. Make homemade pest sprays made of natural ingredients. Rely on predator insects to eat up annoying pests, Use covers to protect crops targeted by insects and garden critters. Use companion planting to help ward off unwanted invaders and practice crop rotation to prevent disease and pests from getting too comfortable in one area of your garden.

For more great articles, read these:

[Yes, you can garden for free](#)

[Ten ways to get free plants for your garden](#)

[How to get free plants](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: avoid these 5 mistakes](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: choosing what to grow](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: diy containers](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: get your timing right](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: indoors vs. outdoors](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: inventory your supplies](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: the importance of biding your time](#)

[Seed starting on a budget: the importance of labeling](#)

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