

Beautiful Gardens

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Why Do You Want a Garden?

Gardening is a lot of hard work. That may not be what you expected to read when you first start reading about gardening. Most gardening guides will start out, and go on and on, about the joys of gardening, and it can be a joy...but it is also a lot of hard work. So, why do you want to grow a garden?

It could be that your yard is plain, and you want to dress it up a bit...but that you don't necessarily want to go out and do the back breaking, hand dirtying work to achieve and maintain this. If this is your situation, call a landscaper. Gardening is a year round job, depending on where you live, and this may be something that you will not enjoy. It may seem more expensive to pay a landscaper, and in some ways, it is. However, if you will not enjoy gardening, this is actually your cheapest option.

If you want to get out and take part in nature, gardening may be for you. But consider the work, and determine whether taking a regular walk along forest trails may soothe your need to be one with nature better. You may enjoy golf more, or collecting seashells. Again, this is hard, manual labor we are talking about.

If you just need a hobby, again, think about the hard work involved. Think about the heat that you will be working in. Think about the dirt under your nails. Think about your sore back. Is there another hobby that will actually be more enjoyable to you? Is there another hobby that won't feel like so much work, which can actually be done outdoors?

If you are still here and still reading, there is a good chance that gardening actually is for you. Those who get into gardening need to be doing so for all of the right reasons. A beautiful yard can be obtained without gardening. You can commune with nature, without gardening. You can have a hobby that isn't gardening.

So, what exactly are all of the right reasons to start gardening? You want a beautiful yard, you get to take a part in nature, and you want a satisfying and rewarding hobby.

But, of course, there is more. You will also see the work as good exercise that you will actually enjoy doing. You will enjoy getting your hands dirty. You will have a great deal of fun selecting the plants for your garden, and designing the layout. When your plants flourish, or start sprouting, you will feel like you've accomplished something and of course when people comment on how beautiful your garden is, you will feel a sense of pride like never before.

You may have heard that if you build it, they will come. Too often, beginner gardeners have this mentality, thinking that if they plant it, it will bloom. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

You see, gardening is a science. It is a science that has been improving generation after generation – luckily – and instead of just dropping a seed into the ground and hoping for the best, there are ways to ensure that those seeds will grow and flourish. If you are serious about gardening, you must recognize it for the science that it is, and be willing to learn a bit about that science in order to be successful.

If you are not willing to take the time to learn, gardening probably isn't for you. It doesn't take long to learn the essentials, and there is a great deal that will be learned simply by doing. Serious gardeners – the ones with the absolutely gorgeous yards that you envy – spend time outdoors, but they also spend time indoors reading and learning about the hobby that they love so much.

Some gardeners believe that this is why Mother Nature gives us winter...so that we can spend some time indoors reading up on gardening tips and techniques, and planning new gardens.

You've seen those avid gardeners who have the beautiful lawns and gardens. They are outside at the crack of dawn, putting in their gardens, and do not return indoors until it gets dark outside. Now, if you fear that gardening will have to be like that for you, in order to achieve the same results, you can stop worrying. It doesn't have to consume your life, but gardening does take a bit of your time each week through the spring, summer, and fall.

Researching, planning, and designing will take up most of your time...believe it or not. After that, preparing the soil and getting the plants in the ground will take up the second greatest amount of time. Once that is done, however, it is just an exercise in maintenance, as Mother Nature does most of the work from that point on. However, your services will be required closer to winter again, when you must winterize your garden.

All tolled, you can expect to spend about twenty hours in researching, planning, and designing. Plan to spend a couple of weekends, during the daylight hours, preparing the soil and getting the plants in the ground, and from there, plan to spend about three hours a week watering, feeding, and weeding. The amount of time that it takes to winterize your garden will depend on how big your garden is, and what types of plants you have.

If you are serious about gardening, and you've considered all of the work and the dirt, as well as the amount of time that must be involved, read on to get started with your very first garden.

About Your Soil

The type of soil that you have matters a great deal, and if you move forward without really considering the soil that you have to work with, failure is a big possibility. Take the time to learn about the soil that you have, and don't assume that your neighbor with the beautiful garden has the same type of soil that you have!

With that said, let's find out more about your soil. The first thing you need to know is which zone you live in. This can easily be discovered with the United States Department of Agriculture's Hardiness Zone Map. This map can be found in most gardening books, or you can use the map online, which is really great, at <http://usna.usda.gov/Hardzone/ushzmap.html>.

Get to that online map, click your area, and keep clicking until you narrow down the area where you are. Here is the breakdown, once you've determined which zone you live in:

USDA Hardiness Zones and Average Annual Minimum Temperature Range

Zone	Fahrenheit	Celsius	Example Cities
1	Below -50 F	Below -45.6 C	Fairbanks, Alaska; Resolute, Northwest Territories (Canada)
2a	-50 to -45 F	-42.8 to -45.5 C	Prudhoe Bay, Alaska; Flin Flon, Manitoba (Canada)
2b	-45 to -40 F	-40.0 to -42.7 C	Unalakleet, Alaska; Pinecreek, Minnesota
3a	-40 to -35 F	-37.3 to -39.9 C	International Falls, Minnesota; St. Michael, Alaska
3b	-35 to -30 F	-34.5 to -37.2 C	Tomahawk, Wisconsin; Sidney, Montana
4a	-30 to -25 F	-31.7 to -34.4 C	Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; Lewistown, Montana
4b	-25 to -20 F	-28.9 to -31.6 C	Northwood, Iowa; Nebraska
5a	-20 to -15 F	-26.2 to -28.8 C	Des Moines, Iowa; Illinois
5b	-15 to -10 F	-23.4 to -26.1 C	Columbia, Missouri; Mansfield, Pennsylvania
6a	-10 to -5 F	-20.6 to -23.3 C	St. Louis, Missouri; Lebanon, Pennsylvania
6b	-5 to 0 F	-17.8 to -20.5 C	McMinnville, Tennessee; Branson, Missouri
7a	0 to 5 F	-15.0 to -17.7 C	Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; South Boston, Virginia
7b	5 to 10 F	-12.3 to -14.9 C	Little Rock, Arkansas; Griffin, Georgia
8a	10 to 15 F	-9.5 to -12.2 C	Tifton, Georgia; Dallas, Texas
8b	15 to 20 F	-6.7 to -9.4 C	Austin, Texas; Gainesville, Florida
9a	20 to 25 F	-3.9 to -6.6 C	Houston, Texas; St. Augustine, Florida
9b	25 to 30 F	-1.2 to -3.8 C	Brownsville, Texas; Fort Pierce, Florida
10a	30 to 35 F	1.6 to -1.1 C	Naples, Florida; Victorville, California
10b	35 to 40 F	4.4 to 1.7 C	Miami, Florida; Coral Gables, Florida
11	above 40 F	above 4.5 C	Honolulu, Hawaii; Mazatlan, Mexico

Now that you know what zone you live in, next determine what type of soil that you have. Just as your soil is not necessarily the same type of soil that your neighbor has, note that not all of the soil in your yard will be the same in all areas of your yard. There are four types of substances that make up soil. These are sand, clay, gravel, and organic matter.

Sand will not hold a shape if you squeeze it. It may be white or tan in color, but it could also be black. Clay will hold a shape, and it feels rather sticky. Clay is could be any color. Gravel has tiny bits of rock in it. Organic matter may include plant stems, small pieces of wood, dead leaves, or even manure. Soil that is lighter in color is an indication that it has little organic matter. Darker soil is best, and it is best to have soil that has a mixture of sand, gravel, clay, and organic matter.

Now, you need to determine how the particles that make up your soil determine the type of soil that you have. There are four types of soil, and these are loam, sandy loam, clay loam, and gravel. Loam is what you are aiming for, and note that even if your soil isn't loam, you can actually do something to create soil that is loam.

Loam soil has about equal parts of sand, clay, and organic matter, with very little gravel, if any. Sandy loam will have more sand than clay. Clay loam will have more clay than sand, and gravel, is actually a combination of loam types that contains a great deal of gravel. Gravel soil makes gardening impossible, unless you plan a rock garden. While you can improve loam soils, you cannot improve gravel soil.

You will also need to perform a soil test, and soil test kits can be purchased where gardening supplies are sold, in most cases. If you can't find a soil test locally, you can purchase them online. You use the kit to collect the soil, and take the sample or samples to your local County Extension Office. There is usually a small fee (less than \$10) for each soil sample to be tested, and it takes about two weeks to get the results.

The soil will be tested for the pH value, and will also check the levels of magnesium, zinc, manganese, potassium, and phosphorus in the soil. The report should also include information for fertilizer and lime recommendations, based on the plants that you intend to plant, if that information is known. It is definitely worth the time and small expense to do this soil test.

Note that depending on the type of soil that you have, and the condition of soil that you have, you may spend the first year of gardening working to improve soil conditions, rather than actually planting and growing anything. Remember that gardening is an ongoing process, so don't despair if this is the case. Use it as a learning experience.

Your Garden Layout

Laying out your garden is one of the most interesting parts of gardening for many gardeners. It requires some degree of skill, however, unless you want a fairly plain garden. Garden layouts can be extremely complicated, or extremely simple, and there are many factors that determine which end of the bar you will lean towards.

First, take a walk around your yard. Take your time, and try to envision different things. Carry a notepad and a camera if you need to. Take pictures and make notes of what you envision for each space where you can plant, based on soil tests.

Don't just picture flowers, trees, shrubs, and plants. Try to envision yard decorations, such as bird baths, bird houses, bird feeders, and statues. Also picture various garden borders that you lean towards, such as rail road ties, plant borders, or rock borders for the various gardens that you will have in your yard. Imagine pathways that you may need to create as well.

Some gardeners spend several weeks planning their gardens, and if this is your first garden, you should plan to spend a great deal of time thinking about – and imagining – different possibilities for your garden or gardens.

Go to gardening books and online resources, and look at the various garden layouts that are already designed. Note that many of these can be changed to work in the space that you have. Make copies of the ones that you like.

Take measurements in your own garden spaces. Measurements are very important. First, you need the right sized bordering materials, and the right amount of fertilizer and such, but you also must consider how far apart certain plants and flowers should be planted in that space...so knowing how large the space is will determine how many plants or seeds you need.

Gardening is rarely combined with technology, unless you are talking about power gardening tools. However, with the use of home computers, gardening and technology mesh very well together. You can purchase and use software to help you design your garden.

As with any software, there are some good programs, some mediocre programs, and some that simply aren't worth the time that it took to create them. Of all of the titles out there, however, 3D Garden Composer seems to be the best. It can be found at <http://www.gardencomposer.com/>, and it features plant objects to use, a plant encyclopedia, the ability to function with the use of digital photographs that you take, and much more.

Note that the software does have a learning curve. In order to effectively use the program to help you design your garden, make sure that you take the time to go through the tutorial, and to really learn how to use the program well.

Better Homes and Gardens have an online garden planner that you can start out with. It can be found at <http://www.bhg.com/gardening/design/nature-lovers/welcome-to-plan-a-garden/>.

If you don't want to use software or online tools, you can plan your garden the old fashioned way. Many gardeners still use graph paper and colored pencils. You don't have to be an artist to do this. Simply draw out your yard on the graph paper, and include your house and buildings. Again, it doesn't have to actually look like your yard or house...you are focusing more on space right now.

Once you have spaces mapped out on the graph paper, you need to put your creativity into play, and use the colored pencils. First, make several copies of the paper with the areas properly mapped out. Try out different color schemes for the entire yard, as well as for the various garden spaces in your yard.

Be sure to include yard furnishings and decorations, as well as pathways in your drawing. Remember that plants will need watering, so you need to note, on the paper, where your outdoor water faucets are, or what areas your sprinkler system covers.

Size matters when you are planning a garden. You must consider the height of the full grown plants. Otherwise, your garden may not look like you expected it to look. Furthermore, you may have tall plants preventing the smaller plants from getting enough sunlight.

Remember that tall plants go in the back, and shorter plants go in the front, when you are planting against a building or structure of any type. For some garden spaces, however, if the sun moves all the way around the garden throughout the day, you might want tall plants in the very center, with smaller plants on the outside.

Space, size, and color aren't the only considerations. You must also consider the different soil types in your yard, consider how the sun moves around your yard, and also consider how water drains or stands in various places. All of this matters a great deal to your garden's success.

Again, take the time to imagine different garden layouts for your space. In the end, when you are sitting out in your garden, sipping a nice cool beverage and enjoying the fruits of your labor, the time you took in planning your garden layout will be more than worth the effort.

What Should You Plant?

When you start looking through a plant encyclopedia, you will be amazed at the plant varieties that you have to choose from. With limited space, you may think that it is an impossible decision to make, because you will want it all. However, you aren't as unlimited as you may think, and the limitations that do exist actually make the decisions easier.

You are limited first by the zone that you live in. Some plants simply will not grow, or will not survive well if they do grow, in certain zones. This is why determining which zone you live in is so vital. Furthermore, certain plants will not do well in certain soil types as well, which is why it is important to find out what type of soil you have.

Finally, some plants won't do well in certain soil condition, which is not only why you want to have your soil condition tested, but also why you may need to spend time improving the condition of your soil before planting anything. Furthermore, some plants won't do well in certain lighting conditions.

As you can see, if you don't already have one, you really need to invest in a plant encyclopedia. It is important to learn as much about the different plants that you want growing in your garden as you possibly can. Without this information, you are reduced to trial and error, which is usually very disappointing, and always expensive.

Refer back to your drawing or the software recommendations for plants that you found when you were designing your layout. You need plants that do the following:

1. They must grow well in your zone. You should never attempt to grow plants not suited for your zone. Others have already tried and failed, and their attempts will save you time, money, and trouble.
2. They must grow well in your type of soil.
3. They must grow well in your soil condition, or the soil must be improved before planting.
4. They must match your color requirements.
5. They must match your height requirements.
6. They must match your space (width) requirements.

7. They must match your season requirements, as well as your year round plan for your garden. Not all flowers and plants grow in the spring and summer. Some grow in the fall or even in the winter months in some areas. You may want to plant different gardens, for different times of the year.
8. Note words such as biennial, perennial, biannual, and annual. A biennial will bloom one year and bloom again the following year, and then must be replanted. A perennial will come back for many years, without replanting. A biannual will only bloom once every two years, and an annual completes its life cycle in one growing season, and must be replanted the following year.
9. They must not require more care than you are willing to give them. Consider the time and attention that the plants need.
10. They must not be subjected to various pests and environmental problems that may exist in your space. Consider insects and animal life when choosing plants.
11. They must be able to hold up to the traffic in your space. If you have children, or neighborhood children, consider this when choosing plant spaces, as well as plants. Some plants can withstand having a ball land on them, while others simply cannot.

With all of this, again, your choices will be very limited, which actually makes the decision process much easier. It is more of an exercise in elimination at first, followed by making a decision from the choices that remain after so many others have been eliminated for various reasons.

Again, as you narrow down your choices, learn as much about the plants that you are considering as possible, until you reach a point where the plant either must be eliminated, or until you have established that it meets all of your criteria, at which point you should write it down on a list. When you have numerous plants on your list, for each area, you can start making your selection.

You should also note, when you make those selections, how the plant or flower is best started. Now, you can grow anything that will do well in your area directly from seed. However, for some areas, it is recommended that the plants be started indoors. Growing from seed means getting your garden planted earlier in the season as well. You can also start with bulbs or plants that have already been started, and which can be purchased from your local nursery.

Preparing the Soil

Before you plant anything, of course, you must prepare the soil for planting. This doesn't mean that you run out and use a hoe to make rows for a garden. There are many steps to preparing the soil, and this preparation increases the chances of success.

Start by getting down to the basic dirt. You need to remove all grass and weeds from the area that you intend to plant. You may need to dig down two to three inches, and get rid of that dirt, and replace it with commercially prepared soil and fertilizer instead.

The soil that you select should have plenty of organic material included in it, but if you have grass free soil, you can also add your own organic material, and just use the dirt that is there...provided that the soil is already in top condition. Organic materials include grass clippings, leaves, and straw. Composted materials are the best choice for organic material.

The organic material should be mixed well with the soil, and this is typically achieved with tilling. If you do not have a power tiller, you can use a forked garden hoe for this task. Make sure that you loosen up the top layers of dirt, and mix the compost or organic materials in well. Experts advise tilling up about sixteen inches of soil (depth).

Once you've removed weeds and grass, have added organic materials, and tilled up the soil, you should cover the area with a thick layer of mulch. Mulch can be purchased in gardening centers. This mulch is very important, because it helps the soil to keep its moisture, and it also helps to prevent weeds from germinating, which of course would result in more weeds.

After you have mulched, you will want to solarize your area. Solarizing sheets can be purchased at gardening centers. These are essentially large sheets of dark plastic. You place the solarizing sheet over your area, and make sure that it is weighed down so that it doesn't blow away.

Solarizing is done at least a few weeks before planting, and some people actually do it when they winterize their garden, as it can also be done over the course of several months. This solarizing technique is very important, because it destroys soil diseases, and sterilizes the soil as well. The sun heats the plastic, which heats the soil to a higher than usual temperature.

When you are ready to plant, a couple of days before hand, remove the solarizing sheet, and smooth out the soil. Do not, however, pack the soil tight. Your soil is now prepared for planting.

Are You Ready to Plant?

Planting really doesn't take very long, and can typically be done in one Saturday morning, depending on how much you have to plant. It is always best to plant seeds, bulbs, and sets in the early morning, or in the late evening. Avoid planting anything during the hottest part of the day.

Different plant sets, bulbs, and seeds have different planting requirements. If you buy packaged seeds, there will be planting directions on the back of the package. If you purchase bulbs or plant sets, you can ask about planting or transplanting them at the nursery.

You should also read your plant encyclopedia to learn more about planting and transplanting the specific plants that you are working with. Different seeds require different depths. Different plants require different spacing as well. Note that planting seeds directly into the ground is considered risky by many gardeners. That doesn't mean that it cannot be done.

However, most gardeners either start their seeds indoors, or plant bulbs or plant sets that they have purchased from the nursery instead. Not only does this give you a head start on your garden, but you have the opportunity to inspect the bulbs or plant sets before purchasing them, and you can look for signs of ill health, choosing only the healthiest plants and bulbs, which of course increase your gardens chances of success.

Again, different plants have different planting requirements, and you need to know this information before you begin. Different plants will also have different food, water, and fertilizer requirements. For some, you will need to feed, water, and fertilize immediately after planting. Some plants needs to be left alone for twenty four hours and then fed, watered, and fertilized.

Make sure that you know which plants need what before you do anything! Some bulbs or plant sets need to sit outdoors for one or two days, in their containers, to adjust to temperature and light changes before being planted in the ground.

Once you have that information, carry your seeds, bulbs, or plant sets outdoors. You probably won't need any gardening tools, but if you do, a small hand held spade as well as a hand held garden rake will do nicely. Make sure that you know how much the different types of plants like their soil packed. Some do better in tightly packed soil, while some require loose soil.

Remember, planting itself doesn't take a long time at all. Up to this point, the design, the soil testing, the research, the soil conditioning, and the soil preparation has been the most time consuming activities associated with gardening.

Plant Food, Water, and Fertilizer

It cannot be said enough. You need as much information on the plants and flowers that you are growing as possible. After planting, you need to know how much food, water, and fertilizer each type of plant requires, and you must provide it.

Not all plants will need plant food, if the soil is conditioned right. If your plants do require food, again, read up to find out how much food they require, and then select your food. There are many options for plant food, including synthetic plant foods, water soluble plant foods, controlled release plant foods, and organic plant foods.

Some plant foods are better than others, but only you can determine which one you prefer. Also note that some plant foods are actually damaging to some plants, and can actually cause them to burn up, or to die. Use caution when feeding your outdoor – and indoor – plants and flowers.

Water is a must, unless you have a cactus or rock garden. Your garden hose should reach all of your garden areas, or you should have a sprinkler system that is set to reach all areas. You do not want high pressured water hitting your plants! Instead, use a sprayer that provides a gentle spray.

Plants are best watered in the very early morning, or in the early evening. In areas that are especially dry and hot, you should water twice a day. However, if you get plenty of rainfall, you may find that you don't have to water your plants at all, but this would be rare.

Just as different plants have different planting and space requirements, they also have different watering requirements. Some plants like soil that is just slightly moist, while others need you to drench the soil. It is important to match plants accordingly when planning your garden. The same pertains to food and fertilizer as well. Over watering plants can be just as harmful as under watering them.

Fertilizer is a subject that is as in-depth as gardening itself. There is a great deal to learn about fertilizer, and its affect on your plants and your soil. Fertilizer is generally needed because soil seldom meets all of the requirements needed for the plants in your garden to thrive. Fertilizer may also reduce numerous pests that threaten your garden.

Food is also designed to provide needed nutrients to the soil and therefore, to the plants, but sometimes food isn't enough, and fertilizer is needed. Sometimes, food isn't needed at all, and only fertilizer is needed. In rare instances, neither is needed, and only in the cases of cactus gardens and rock gardens is water not needed. It is important to know this and some basic facts about fertilizer as well.

Right now, you are probably wondering why you took the time to condition your soil, if it will never be enough. The fact is that it actually is enough to properly condition your soil, in the beginning. However, as time goes by, and your plants keep taking what they need from the soil, those nutrients must be replaced, or the soil suffers, resulting in plants that either does not grow at all, or plants that just don't appear to be very healthy.

Remember that there are six nutrients that your plants need. These include nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. Oxygen and carbon are provided by the air that we all breathe, and hydrogen is provided by the water. The rest must either be naturally in the soil, or be provided in food and/or fertilizer.

No matter how great the condition of your soil is, you will most likely need more nitrogen. It seems that there is never enough nitrogen. Be careful, however. You might think of nitrogen as a favorite food of plants. They will fill up on it, and not get as much as they need of the other five nutrients. You want your garden to have a well balanced diet.

For fertilizer, you must choose between an organic fertilizer and a synthetic fertilizer. Organic fertilizers contain only natural substances, while synthetic fertilizers are chemically processed. You might assume, automatically, that organic fertilizer is best, but this isn't necessarily the case.

You see, organic fertilizers are not always water soluble. What this means is that the nutrients in the organic fertilizer reach the plants slowly, over a period of time, whereas a plants benefit almost instantly from a synthetic fertilizer. If you want to go with organic fertilizers only, you must fertilize in the fall, so that the soil is properly fertilized when spring rolls around again.

Organic fertilizers should be used, however, when you are improving the condition of your soil, in preparation of planting, and it is a good idea to fertilize with an organic fertilizer each fall, in preparation for the following spring. Otherwise, use synthetic fertilizers.

Choosing a fertilizer can be confusing. In most cases, you will want to select a synthetic fertilizer that says 5-5-5 on it. These numbers tell you what comprises the fertilizer. The first number is for Nitrogen. The second number is for Phosphorus, and the third is for potassium. This is known as the NPK ratio. You can also select fertilizer that has been mixed for specific plants and flowers, such as roses and tomatoes.

Remember that plants and flowers are living, breathing things, just like people are. They require food, water, and fertilizer in order to survive and flourish. If you fail to provide these things, they will surely die, if they bother to bloom at all.

Dealing with Garden Pests

Garden pests often take up more of your time than the actual garden does. Pests include insects, wild life, and even parasites. Pests could also include household pets, and unfortunately, even neighborhood children.

Pests can literally destroy a garden overnight, causing you to give up your gardening hobby, or starting over from scratch, only to have your garden ravaged by those same pests over and over again.

The only real solution is to either get rid of the pests, or to dissuade them, making your garden an unattractive place for them. Most of us are not going to stand guard out in our gardens, loaded for bear...and how would one shoot a worm anyway?

Let's first deal with insects. Insects need hiding places, and they will happily hide in old piles of leaves, piles of junk, or other dark and moist places. They love things that are decaying, and you would do well to remove these things from your garden, as well as from your entire yard.

Unfortunately, you cannot remove the soil that they also like. What you can do, however, is use your hand held garden rake and turn the top layer of soil over around your plants regularly, being careful not to damage the plant or the plants delicate roots.

There are numerous pesticides on the market, but if you use any type of pesticide, use an organic pesticide. This is especially important if you ingest anything that you grow. Use all pesticides carefully. If you use too much, you will kill the pests, but you will most likely kill your plants as well.

Also note that some insects are beneficial in gardens. Many plants act as natural repellents to certain insects, as well as to certain animals. First, determine what your particular pest problems are, and then look up those pests on the Internet to determine which plants to plant that will make your garden more unattractive to those specific pests, and also plant flowers and such that attract the insects that are actually beneficial.

Have you ever noticed that most gardens include bird baths and bird feeders? There is a reason for this. It isn't that all gardeners like birds. It is the fact that birds can be pests. So, instead of only supplying a garden for them to feed on, gardeners learned to make more desirable bird feed available to our feathered pests, turning them into feathered friends who only add to the ambiance of a garden.

Gophers are a tricky problem. They live and work under the ground, and can do serious damage to any garden in a very short amount of time. Do you see mysterious mounds of dirt and holes in your garden? Those are gopher signs. You may need to set traps to catch and remove these gophers. You can also use smoke bombs in their holes to chase them out.

Raccoons, bears, deer, and other wild animals are not only a threat to your garden; some are an actual threat to you and your children. Start by calling your local game and fish commission to find out if you can have wild animals captured and removed from your area. If not, use plants that they don't like.

You can also contact your local barber or beautician, and offer to purchase human hair clippings from them. If you scatter this human hair around the perimeter of your garden, it tends to scare the wild animals off...they smell a human. You will need to spread more human hair about after each rain, however.

Then, of course, we have human pests, often in the form of children. Children enjoy gardens as much as anyone else and they are not purposely destroying all of your hard work. They are just being children.

Your own children won't be too much of a problem, because they are yours, and they have to follow your rules. Let them know that they are to stay out of your garden. Let them know where they can and cannot play ball, where they can and cannot ride their bikes, and where they can and cannot dig in the dirt.

The neighbor's children, however, do not realize that they need to follow your rules. Bake a cake and knock on the door. Ask to speak to the children and their parents, and ask them nicely to try not to damage your plants. Hopefully, your visit will do some good, but don't count on it.

The best option is first to plan your garden around high traffic. Following that, create pathways through your garden or yard so that people can walk around the gardens easily. Also, make sure that all of your garden areas have some type of border around them. Some people use plants as borders, and this isn't a problem if you don't have any human pests in the area. However, for human pests, use non-plant borders that can only be trespassed with effort, as opposed to accidental crossings.

When it's all said and done, pests are a part of gardening. When you notice pests, the faster you act, the better off you, your garden, and your pocket book will be. Failing to act will cost you time, money, and your garden eventually. For all pests, there is a solution. It's just a question of identifying the pest, first, and then finding the solution that resolves the pest problem.

Weeding, Pruning, Propagating, & Dividing

Once you've got your plants in the ground, you may think that the work is over...and for the most part, it is. However, your garden must be maintained now, or it will become overgrown with weeds, and even with plants, which will eventually either strangle each other or starve each other.

Many people mistakenly think that maintaining a garden is feeding, watering, and fertilizing. Those tasks, however, are parts of growing the garden...they are not tasks associated with maintaining a garden. Maintaining includes weeding, pruning, propagating, and dividing. Let's take a look at each maintenance task separately:

Weeding: Weeding is essential to your gardens growth and overall health. Weeds are often ugly and ruin the look of your garden, but some weeds are actually kind of pretty. However, ugly or pretty, all weeds must go! Weeds suck up the nutrients that your plants need in order to grow and survive – at an alarming rate.

Weeding should be done every two weeks during the spring, summer, and fall. This entails more than just using your garden hand rake and tilling them up. Weeds can germinate (and do) just like anything else. If you compared weeds to animals, weeds would be rabbits, because with germination, they reproduce like rabbits.

There are many weed killers on the market, but you should avoid them...because they can kill the plants and harm household pets as well. Instead, pull them up by the roots, and remove them completely from the garden – put them in trash bags, and have them carted away.

Pruning: Not all plants and flowers will require pruning, but some will. Pruning may involve pruning sheers, but it could also be as simple as using your fingers to pinch off a piece of a plant. Pruning is the technique used to remove portions of plants that need to be removed.

The plant portions may need to be removed for various reasons. Some possible reasons for pruning include encouraging re-growth, or to remove diseased or dead portions of a plant. Pruning may also encourage re-growth of stronger plants.

Before you run out and purchase pruning sheers or start pinching your plants, again, read as much as possible on each type of plant that you have, and learn the pruning recommendations for those particular plants!

Propagating: You may not need to propagate your plants at all. It depends on the types of plants that you have, and your future gardening plans. You see, propagating is essentially harvesting seeds, roots, or stems from your plants, for future planting.

Stem cuttings are not as easy as they sound. There are three types of stems: hardwood, softwood, and semi-softwood. You take softwood cuttings from plants that are currently growing, while the stems are still really soft, as are semi-softwood cuttings. Hardwood cuttings come from plants that are dying, in most cases.

Cuttings are usually placed in water, with the bottoms emerged, until root spindles grow, at which time they are planted in soil filled containers.

Root cuttings are much easier. You simply jerk the entire plant up by the roots, and wash it off. Cut the plant part from the root, and cut the root into pieces about three inches in size. When you replant the roots, plant them horizontally (sideways). Most root cuttings are planted just about a half inch under the soil.

You can also opt not to cut the entire plant from the root. Instead, just cut away three inch sections of the root, and then replant the plant that you pulled up as well.

Dividing: Many plants don't need to be divided, but some do. This is especially true for perennials. Research has found that dividing perennials actually makes the plants stronger each year.

Dividing plants is a fairly easy concept. It has a three fold purpose. First, it makes the plants stronger, overall. Second, it keeps a plant from choking itself to death, and third, it gives you more plants.

To divide plants, carefully dig up the plant that you wish to divide. Wash the soil away from the roots, so that you can easily see the roots. Plants are divided at the root, giving each divided portion enough roots left to survive and flourish with. Use a sharp clean knife to make the divisions. Replant all divisions, including the parent plant, and make sure that you water and feed them well afterward.

Again, read about each plant. Just as each plant has particular feeding, watering, and fertilizing requirements, they also have different propagating, dividing, and pruning requirements, as well as methods. Make sure you know these requirements and methods before you start.

Winterizing Your Garden

Many people mistakenly think that gardeners have nothing to do during the winter. They would be incredibly wrong. Gardeners have plenty to do in the winter, but they have a great deal to do either in the late fall or in the earliest stages of winter, when it is time to winterize their gardens.

During the late fall, you will need to plant bulbs that will bloom during the following spring. This is usually done any time between September and December, and the time actually depends on the climate where you live. Warmer climates will plant these bulbs in December, and colder climates will plant them in September.

Rake your lawn and put the leaves in the compost pile. You do not want these leaves to remain on the ground through winter, as this can cause your lawn to die.

Also, you should remove flowers and vegetables that are annuals completely, as these will only rot in the ground, causing the same problem as leaves that have fallen. These can also go in the compost pile, unless they were unhealthy, in which case you do not want them to be any part of your compost.

Once your perennials appear to be dying off, cut them down close to the ground. These cuttings can go in the compost pile. Pull up weeds, and dispose of them – but not in the compost pile.

In some areas, you will need to dig up perennial bulbs that are too delicate to survive the winter months. These bulbs can be stored in a paper bag, with vermiculite, which can be purchased in gardening centers. They should be stored in a place that is no colder than 65 degrees Fahrenheit, and they should be kept dry.

If you have roses, they will need to be protected for the winter. Be sure to read information concerning how to winterize rose bushes. This usually involves pruning, and then wrapping the bushes in thick plastic.

Get good winter mulch for your gardens. This can be purchased at garden centers. Apply a thick layer of it in all of your gardens, and especially where you have perennials planted. Organic mulch works great. You should also use an organic fertilizer in your gardens at this time.

Finally, wash up your gardening tools. This is a good time for repairs and replacements, as many gardening tools will be on sale at this time of the year. Also, make sure that you read the winterizing recommendations for each plant type that you have just to make sure that you've covered all of the bases.

Now that you've made it through your first gardening season, you can take the winter off...right? Not really. If you really got into gardening, and found that it is indeed a hobby that you enjoy, you will most likely spend your winters curled up next to the fire, reading gardening books, or playing with your gardening software, or using graph paper to design next spring's garden.

You may love gardening so much that you start an indoor garden, or you may actually brave the cold and grow a winter garden as well. Lots of things can be planted in the winter, and lots of plants actually don't bloom until winter, but this doesn't work well in areas that get a great deal of snowfall.

If you hated gardening, you can spend the winter trying to find another hobby. However, you shouldn't decide that you hate gardening if your garden didn't succeed. Don't feel like you failed, or that you weren't any good at it.

Once again, gardening is an ongoing process. There will always be good seasons and bad seasons. Sometimes there will be wonderful seasons, and sometimes there will be devastating seasons. But altogether, it is an ongoing, growing, learning process.

If your garden didn't do well this spring, summer, or fall, spend your winter figuring out why, so that you can make corrections when spring comes around again. Mother Nature can be very harsh, but she is always willing to give you another chance.

Keep a gardening journal. Write down what you do, what you plant, how often you water, soil conditions, and things of this nature. This information will become invaluable to you over the years, and will help you to continually improve your gardens. During the winter, you will find that you refer to it often when you are planning your spring garden.

Yes, gardening can be a lot of work, in the beginning, but when early fall rolls around, and you are enjoying the fruits of that labor, it really is all worth it. It can be fun and interesting. It is great exercise. It gets you outdoors in the fresh air and sunshine. Gardening, believe it or not, reduces stress and brings about a sense of peace and well-being.

While it is hard work in the beginning, this isn't always the case. You will reach a point where it doesn't feel like work at all...even if you are doing the same amount of work. You will come to love gardening so much, it will become like a haven to you, where all of your cares kind of slip away, to be replaced by the beauty that you created, with Mother Nature's kind help.