

Dr. Pierce's Quick Start Guide For Growing Food To Improve Your Health





Overview:

Did you know that growing some of your own food is an easy and fun way to improve your health? Whether you are a new or an experienced gardener, read below to see why growing an edible garden is recommended for health and longevity.



The BAD news:

Chronic illnesses like heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and dementia are the major causes of disability and death in America. While many of us blame “bad genes”, eating an unhealthy diet and practicing other harmful habits are actually the main reasons why we develop these illnesses.



The GOOD news:



Doctors and researchers have proven that healthy habits - such as eating a plant-predominant diet, getting daily physical activity, prioritizing quality sleep, addressing chronic stress, avoiding toxic substances, and building a loving community can help prevent, treat, and even sometimes reverse these chronic illnesses. Growing an edible garden is a great way to incorporate these and other healthy habits into our daily lives, all while saving a little money on our grocery bills.



Why Growing an Edible Garden is Good for Our Health

Scientific research has shown that gardening can improve our health in so many ways. Gardening increases our access to the healthiest foods on the planet, like fresh fruits and vegetables. We can grow superfoods like dark leafy greens and berries, and pick them at peak flavor and nutrition for ourselves and our families. Growing an edible garden keeps us physically active, helping us burn unwanted calories and build muscle. Being in the garden helps reduce stress, anxiety, and depression.



Getting out in the sun increases our vitamin D and can even improve our sleep. Additionally, growing a garden keeps us more connected with nature and builds important social connections with our neighbors and fellow gardeners.

Why growing a garden is good for the planet

When we pick food from our own gardens, we don't need plastic produce bags or wasteful packaging. Food doesn't need to be shipped long distances, which cuts down on fossil fuel use and air pollution. We can water with rainwater collected from our roofs or "grey" water from the sink or shower, cutting down on water usage. We can also choose to garden without using synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, reducing the toxins that enter the earth and our bodies.

Why growing a garden is good for our children and grandchildren

Gardening is a healthy habit that gets children outside and off of their screens. It teaches children where food comes from and gets them more interested in real, healthy food, in general. The more kids eat healthy and stay active, the less likely they will develop health conditions like diabetes and obesity. The more they interact with nature, the more they may be interested in protecting the environment and the future of their planet.



Some Things to Try



Grow some greens - greens like kale, chard, collards, spinach, arugula, bok choy (and many others) are super healthy for us and can be grown most, if not all, of the year. Try to eat dark leafy greens multiple times a day, every day, to maximize your heart health.



Grow during the summer - usually the most fun time of the year, seeing the tomatoes ripen on the vine, watching green beans climb a trellis, and harvesting all the zucchini you can eat.



Grow during the winter - we need healthy food and healthy habits all year round, so consider growing something during the fall and winter if your climate allows for it (tricks like row covers and mini-greenhouses help you extend your growing season). Or grow herbs, microgreens, and sprouts inside your home on the window sill or under grow lights.



Grow a little fruit tree - You don't need much space to grow a small fruit tree, and it will pay you back for decades to come. You can choose dwarf varieties or prune during the summer to help keep it small. If you have room, try to plant multiple fruit trees to extend your harvest season and increase variety.



Get into the garden every day - it's good for your garden and good for you. Our gardens "nudge" us to tend them daily - from planting to watering to weeding to harvesting, we have lots of reasons to get out there every day. The healthiest practices are the ones we do on a regular basis.



Have fun - gardening is one of the most fun and healthy "chores" you can find. When you can, do it with a friend or family member to spread the joy.



Tips for Success

If you are feeling hesitant, just start small. Even planting one or two tomato plants or a few lettuce plants is a good way to get your feet wet without getting overwhelmed.

Start with something that you love to eat and is easy to grow in your area. If you don't know what grows well in your town, ask other gardeners or visit a community garden for ideas. Better yet, volunteer in that community garden. You can learn from the pros that volunteer there, and you often get to take home free produce at the end of the day.

Check out this website: Search “master gardener and (your city’s name)”. Master Gardener programs are available around the country and give free advice to both beginning and experienced gardeners. They will have local recommendations that make sense for you, even more so than what you might read in a book.

Find a YouTube channel on food gardening that you enjoy: some great options are Grow Your Own Vegetables (by Stacey Murphy), RareSeeds (Baker Creek Seeds), Gardenerd, Growing Your Greens, and Charles Dowding. These can be fun and motivating as well as educational.

Find some podcasts that you enjoy: a few options are The Beet, Gardenerd podcast, BBC’s Gardeners’ Question Time, All Things Gardening. You can play it in the car and learn a little about gardening while running your errands or commuting to work.

Check out some books from the library or your local bookstore: a few possibilities are Growing Your Own Fruit And Veg For Dummies (by Geoff Stebbings), How To Become A Gardener (by Ashlie Thomas), Grow A Little Fruit Tree (by Ann Ralf), Grow Your Own Mini Fruit Garden (by Christy Wilhelmi)

In Summary



Whether you are growing some fruit and veg for the first time, or already a big-time gardener, the more time you spend in the garden, the more you'll reap the rewards, both in health and in produce. Go ahead and get out there, it's good for you - and for the planet!





Dr. Jeff Pierce is passionate about using a whole food, plant-based diet and other lifestyle medicine modalities to help people get healthier, get off of medications, and live longer, fuller lives. His goal is to meet his patients where they are, and work with them at their pace to improve their health, one day at a time.



Dr. Pierce is an assistant clinical professor in the University of California - San Francisco volunteer clinical physician program. He is also active in his local master gardener program, as well as a member of the California Rare Fruit Growers. He and his family grow the majority of their fruit and vegetables in their urban garden in Sonoma County, Northern California. He is board certified in both Family Medicine and Lifestyle Medicine and is licensed to see patients in California, Florida, and Texas. He is currently accepting new patients at the amazing nationwide telemedicine practice, Love.Life Telehealth (telehealth.love.life/jeffrey-pierce-md). To follow his family's urban food forest, check out instagram.com/drjeffpierce.

