

HOW TO MAKE SURE OUR CHILDREN EAT HEALTHILY

Which vegetables might youngsters grow for themselves?

There's no better way to ensure children eat healthily than to let them grow their own vegetables.

Tomatoes are an obvious choice, especially cherry types, as children can pick and eat them straight off the plant.

Cucumbers are another candidate. The traditional type is too large, but look for newer varieties which are ready when they're just 10cm long.

Vegetables that produce something to eat quickly, such as radish, spring onion, baby carrot and baby

salad leaf, are ideal.

They should be ready in as little as six weeks in summer.

Gardening Which?

plays an active role in the government's 'Growing Schools' campaign, which encourages children to get first-hand experience of the natural world and shows how schools can make the most of their grounds as a learning resource.

Gardening Which?

was involved in the successful Growing Schools Garden which highlighted the campaign at the

Hampton Court Show in 2002, and hopes to be involved in a similar project this year

Which? campaigns against irresponsible marketing of food to children. There are proposals to stop ads for food and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar from appearing during TV shows targeted at under-16s and some adult shows of 'particular appeal' to that age group. Which? believes the proposals are flawed because many shows most popular with children would not be covered.



Six of the best

These vegetables are easy to look after and need little space



SALAD LEAF

A supermarket favourite that's easy to grow yourself

■ Buy packs of ready-mixed salad seed in garden centres or buy separate packs and mix your own. Try Little Gem lettuce, red chard, salad rocket and mizuna (pictured). You can add other flavours such as coriander or mustard.

■ Starting in April, scatter seed thinly. Cover with a dusting of compost and water regularly.

■ When plants are 4-6cm high, cut enough for a meal, about 2cm above the compost. This should be after about six weeks.

WE LIKE Stumps should regrow for second or third cuts. Sow plants a fortnight apart to get regular pickings all summer.



CARROTS

You may find growing these in the ground tricky, but it's easy in pots

■ Choose an early variety such as Early Nantes, which will produce baby roots in six to eight weeks.

■ Scatter the seed thinly (aim for roughly 2cm apart) and cover with more compost. Water regularly but not too much.

■ Baby carrots can be pulled out as soon as they reach about 1cm across. Pull up as many as you need for a meal and then leave the rest to grow on. They'll push each other apart until they fill the pot.

WORTH KNOWING When you get the hang of this, baby beetroot and radishes can be grown in the same way.



COURGETTES

You should be able to get up to 30 fruits off a single plant

■ Buy small plants from a garden centre in May. They're very sensitive to frost, so wait until the end of May in colder parts.

■ Courgettes make large, lopsided patio plants. They're easier to manage in the ground but need a square metre to themselves.

■ Give them a good soaking once a week in hot weather to ensure a constant supply of fruits.

■ Pick when they reach about 15cm or they'll turn into marrows and stop producing.

WORTH KNOWING When disease strikes in late summer, leaves die off and then it's time for the compost heap.



DWARF BEANS

Supermarket beans are expensive and are often imported

■ Buy seeds of a small-podded variety such as Safari – these are sold as Kenyan beans.

■ Sow short rows monthly from late May through July for a regular supply. They take about eight weeks to mature.

■ Sow seeds every 10cm directly into a shallow trench made with a hoe or trowel. Plants are bushy and shouldn't need support. Once little pods start to form, water weekly in hot weather.

■ Check every other day and pick pods between 10-15cm long.

WE THINK Why bother buying them when they're easy to grow and taste better fresh?



Grow your own veg

How to get started, what vegetables to try and where to plant them



TOMATOES

An obvious choice for a patio pot but worth growing in the garden, too

- Choose a cherry variety such as Gardener's Delight or the ultra-sweet Sungold, which both need supporting, or the dwarf Tumbler which doesn't and is good for trouble-free pots.

- Start to raise from seed in March on a warm, well-lit windowsill. Alternatively, buy plants from a garden centre in May.

- Provide a cane or stake and train tall plants by nipping out side shoots at the base of the leaves to leave a single main stem and tie this in.

- Leave any shoots with flower buds, which will become trusses of fruit.

WORTH KNOWING Let the fruits ripen fully in the sun to enjoy unrivalled flavour.



POTATOES

Easy to grow, even in patio pots

- Pick an early variety. You'll need one seed potato per 10-litre pot. Seed potatoes are grown to avoid disease and can be bought at a garden centre. Half fill the pot with compost and push the potato just beneath the surface.

- As shoots start to grow, fill up the pot with compost. Potato foliage is sensitive to frost so cover it on colder nights.

WE LIKE Plant in early April and by late June or July, you'll have lots of egg-sized new potatoes.

DON'T BOTHER WITH...

Vegetables in the cabbage family are prey to pests. Pumpkins and marrow take over a garden, given a chance, while even experienced gardeners find celery a challenge.

Many of the fresh fruit and vegetables that we eat have to travel many miles before they reach our plates. Supermarkets will often source

produce from abroad to fulfil our desire for foods when they are out of season. Even organic produce may have travelled a long distance and come with excessive packaging.

The easiest way to have vegetables that are chemical-free, as fresh as possible and without any packaging is to grow your own. And the only distance they will travel is from your garden to your plate.

Growing your own is much simpler than you might expect. To get started, all you need is a couple of pots or a patch of soil and you can make a contribution to your family's five-a-day portions of fruit and veg. Get your children involved and they can catch the healthy eating habit early.

We've picked six of the easiest and most rewarding veg to start off with. They'll take up hardly any room in the garden and will give you a rich supply of fresh produce. But what kind of space do you need to grow your vegetables successfully?

The only distance your vegetables will travel is from your garden to your plate



WHERE TO PLANT

On the patio

If you want to grow plants in pots, you'll need an area of patio that's in the sun most of the day. Pots which hold at least ten litres or are about 25cm diameter will suit smaller vegetables.

Big plants such as courgettes need at least 15 litres (30cm diameter). Plastic pots take less watering than terracotta. Fill them with a multi-purpose compost such as New Horizon Multi-Purpose Peat-Free Compost, a *Gardening Which?* Best Buy.

Water plants regularly to keep them moist, but not sodden. If you have containers for ornamental plants, you could substitute a couple of edible ones and water them all together each day, or buy a drip watering system, which costs from £20 for a basic kit that will water up to ten pots.

Short-lived leafy or root veg should get all their nutrition from the compost. Fruiting veg such as tomatoes and cucumbers need a high-potash feed, the kind you use on your flowers.



Harvesting a crop of potatoes (above) and carrots (below)



A small vegetable plot

If you have space, a vegetable plot, even one as small as a 3x1.2m bed, should produce regular pickings throughout the summer at least. The ideal position is sheltered from wind but in sun for most of the day, especially if you plan to grow tender plants like cucumbers and tomatoes. If the soil already grows flowers or a lawn, it should be fine for vegetables. Make sure it is well drained (rain should soak away in winter) but not too dry in summer. Dig the area over as deeply as you can – ideally at least a spade's depth – and work in organic matter such as garden compost or soil conditioner to improve the texture and feed the crops.

An allotment

Another option is an allotment. Try a half plot (about 125 square metres) or smaller to start. Ideally, go for a recently worked plot near a water supply. Expect to pay about £30 a year for a full plot. There may be a waiting list, but your local council can advise on this.

Insider information

Gardening Which? expert Steve Mercer gives his top tips for getting a good crop



■ Start a compost heap. Your local council may provide a plastic bin or offer a discount on buying one. Otherwise one costs about £30. All you need do is deposit the material, including grass cuttings, and wait for it to rot down.



■ Should you go organic? Organic veg use nutrients from the soil and rotted organic matter. They grow more slowly and give

a smaller crop, but some say they taste better. Without man-made pesticides, the idea is to stop pests reaching your crop in the first place. There are organic insecticides, such as derris and soft soap, but use even these sparingly.

■ Water young plants and seedlings for a maximum of two weeks to help them establish. Afterwards they should find enough moisture in the soil. If they are suffering during a long hot summer, go for a weekly drenching rather than daily sprinklings.



■ If small slugs are a problem, a biological control such as Nemaslug kills them in the soil. Greenfly and other flying pests can be kept off crops using garden fleece or fine mesh netting (from garden centres).



■ *Gardening Which?* does more comprehensive tests, trials and comparisons than any group or publication, so you can choose the best plants, products and services. You also get a free advice service, regular guides on specific topics, free factsheets and seed offers. Try three issues for only £3. See www.which.co.uk/gwtrial.



Calendar

Our diary of when the jobs need to be done

Feb/March Prepare the veg

plot. Dig it over and work in organic matter (a bucketful per square metre). Stand potatoes

in a warm place to sprout. Buy seeds of beetroot, carrot, salads, beans and lettuce.



April Start

potatoes and other veg in patio pots. Be prepared to cover if frost is predicted. Sow

hardier veg such as carrots, beetroot and lettuce in a veg plot.



May Buy in young plants of tender crops such as tomatoes and courgettes and plant outside when the weather is mild.



June Harvest your first crop of salad, baby veg and new potatoes from the patio. As pots are harvested, start another batch for late summer.



July/Aug Pick courgettes and beans regularly when they're big enough. Keep weeds under control and water in long dry spells.



Sept/Oct Tidy the veg plot and put crop debris on the compost

heap. Empty patio pots and recycle the compost as a soil conditioner or save to use for ornamental plots next spring.

