

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE - GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD.....

Written by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#) in Jan 2019

Growing your own food has many rewards, including providing you with fresher, uncontaminated produce, cutting your grocery bill, increasing your sense of well-being and slashing your risk of depression

Research shows gardening is the most common hobby among centenarians around the world, suggesting the benefits it provides may help maximize your longevity as well

Gardening fulfills several healthy lifestyle criteria, including sun exposure, a supply of fresh, uncontaminated food, exposure to beneficial soil microbes, physical activity, social contact, stress relief, life purpose and life satisfaction

To grow nutrient-dense food you need healthy soil. The five basic principles to growing topsoil and building a healthy soil ecosystem in your garden include avoiding disturbing the soil microbiome, protecting the soil's surface, plant diversification, maintaining living roots as long as possible and incorporating plants that attract beneficial insects

One of the simplest and most inexpensive gardening alternatives is to grow your own sprouts, which are also among the most nutrient-dense foods available

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Growing your own food has many rewards, from providing you with fresher, uncontaminated produce and cutting your grocery bill, to increasing your sense of well-being and slashing your risk of **depression**.

Interestingly, research shows gardening is also the most common hobby among centenarians around the world, suggesting the benefits it provides may help maximize your longevity as well.

Likewise, research shows farmers are one-third less likely to have a chronic illness than non-farmers,<sup>1</sup> and are less likely to die from **diabetes** or **heart disease**.<sup>2</sup> Research<sup>3</sup> also shows elderly individuals who garden on a regular basis have a 36 percent lower risk of dementia than non-gardeners.

According to Blue Zones longevity researcher Dan Buettner, who has studied the habits and pastimes of centenarians around the world, people who live to 100 and beyond have a number of

things in common, including strong social support networks, daily exercise habits, a plant-based diet — and gardening.<sup>4</sup>

## The Many Health Benefits of Gardening

Perhaps this is not so surprising when you consider that gardening fulfills several healthy lifestyle criteria, including:

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Regular sun exposure (which has **benefits beyond vitamin D production**)

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Fresh air

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Fresh, uncontaminated food

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Exposure to **beneficial soil microbes** that may support a healthy microbiome

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Physical activity

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Social contact and camaraderie

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Stress relief and general sense of well-being — As reported by BBC News:<sup>5</sup>

*"In a recent Dutch study,<sup>6</sup> researchers asked participants to complete a strenuous task and then split them into two groups. One group read indoors and the other gardened outdoors for 30 minutes.*

*The group that read reported that their mood 'further deteriorated,' while the group that gardened not only had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol afterwards, they also reported a good mood ... There is no panacea for growing old but, the study suggests, gardening does appear to improve our quality of life as we age."*

Indeed, many gardeners report feeling a sense of joyful well-being, and according to Johns Hopkins,<sup>7</sup> having a cheerful temperament can significantly reduce your risk of suffering a heart attack or sudden cardiac death

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Life purpose — As noted by Dr. Bradley Willcox of the University of Hawaii, who studied centenarians in Okinawa, an area known for having the highest ratio of centenarians (approximately 50 per 100,000 people are over 100 years old), "In Okinawa, they

anybody who grows old healthfully needs an ikigai, or reason for living. Gardening is something to get up for every day"<sup>8</sup>

Life satisfaction — According to a Gardeners World magazine survey,<sup>9</sup> 80 percent report being "happy" and satisfied with their lives, compared to 67 percent of non-gardeners. The more time spent in the garden, the higher their satisfaction scores; 87 percent of those who spend more than six hours a week in their gardens report feeling happy, compared to 73 percent of those who spend less time in their gardens

## Gardening Can Be Done Even in Tiny Spaces

There are many different ways to grow your own food, even if you live in an apartment. If you have a yard, consider yourself blessed, but if not, Alex Mitchell's book, "The Edible Balcony,"<sup>10</sup> is an excellent resource for how to grow produce in small spaces.

You can use virtually every square foot of your space, including vertical space, for growing food. Hanging baskets are ideal for a wide variety of foods, such as strawberries, leafy greens, runner beans, pea shoots, tomatoes and a variety of herbs. And, instead of flowers, window boxes can hold herbs, greens, radishes, scallions, bush beans, strawberries, chard and chilies, to name just a few.

For tips on starting your own garden — whether large or small, indoors or outside, for winter or spring — see my previous articles on the following topics:

- Creating a [winter garden](#)
- Creating [edible gardens in small spaces](#)
- [Composting made easy](#), even for city dwellers
- How to increase your garden yield eightfold, using [high performance agriculture](#) techniques

## Basic Gardening Guidance

Rule No. 1 for growing nutrient-dense food is building healthy soil. There are five basic principles to growing topsoil and building a healthy soil ecosystem, and these rules apply whether you're working a farm or tending a small vegetable garden in your backyard:

1. **Avoid disturbing the soil microbiome** — The less mechanical disturbance the better, which means no tillage, herbicides, pesticides or fungicides
2. **Protect the soil's surface** — Use cover crops, untreated lawn clippings, mulch and wood chips to maintain soil biology, prevent water evaporation and lower soil temperature, which is particularly important on hot days
3. **Diversify your crops** — Having a diverse array of plant life is essential to healthy soil, and cover crops help fulfill this requirement
4. **Maintain living roots in the ground as long as possible** — Growing something at all times is key to soil vitality, so be sure to plant a cover crop after you harvest your vegetables
5. **Integrate livestock and other animals, including insects** — To mimic the impact of wild herds, regenerative farmers will pasture chickens, cows, lambs, pigs and other animals to benefit the soil and ensure a highly nutrient-dense finished product.

While many homeowners cannot keep farm animals on their property, you can easily attract pollinators and predator insects to ward off garden pests by including lots of flowering plants.

## **New to Gardening? Start With Sprouts**

One of the simplest and most inexpensive gardening alternatives is to grow your own sprouts. They're a particularly excellent choice during winter months, when outdoor gardening is limited or ruled out. They also grow quickly, allowing you to harvest in about a week, and you don't have to cook them. Sprouts are also a perfect complement to fermented vegetables, which are also easy and inexpensive to make at home, from scratch.

Sprouts are actually among the most nutrient-dense foods out there. Topping the list are sunflower seed and pea sprouts, which are typically about 30 times more nutritious than organic vegetables. Sunflower and pea sprouts are among my own favorites. Broccoli sprouts, known for their anticancer activity, are another excellent choice. Other commonly sprouted beans, nuts, seeds and grains include:

- **Alfalfa** — A good source of vitamins A, B, C, D, E, F and K
- **Mung bean** — Good source of protein, fiber and vitamins C and A
- **Watercress** — According to nutritional tests, watercress appears to be the most nutrient-dense plant food available. Based on 17 nutrients, including potassium, fiber, protein, calcium, iron, thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folate, zinc and vitamins A, B6, B12, C, D, E and K, watercress scored a perfect 100<sup>11</sup>
- **Brussels sprouts** — One cup of cooked Brussels sprouts contains just 56 calories but is packed with more than 240 percent of the recommended daily amount (RDA) of vitamin K1 and nearly 130 percent of the RDA for vitamin C. Brussels sprouts are also a good source of fiber, manganese, potassium, choline, B vitamins, antioxidants and other health-promoting phytochemicals

Another plant that is easy to grow that has many valuable health benefits is fennel. All parts, including bulb, stalk, leaves and seeds, are edible, and have a delicious flavor reminiscent of licorice. Raw fennel contains more than 7 grams of dietary fiber per bulb, and each 1-cup serving contains 360 milligrams (mg) of potassium, 43 mg of calcium, 10 mg of vitamin C and 15 mg of magnesium.<sup>12</sup>

The nutrients in fennel helps support healthy digestion, metabolism, blood pressure, heart health and immune function, and help prevent inflammation and cancer.<sup>13</sup>

## Great Reasons to Eat More Sprouts

Many of the benefits of sprouts relate to the fact that plants contain more concentrated amounts of nutrients in their initial phase of growth. As a result, you need to eat far less sprouts, in terms of amount, compared to a mature plant. For example, when sprouting seeds, nuts, beans and grains you get:<sup>14</sup>

- **Higher vitamin content** — In some seeds, the vitamin content is increased by as much as 500 percent during the sprouting process<sup>15</sup>
- **Higher enzyme content** — Sprouts contain an estimated 100 times more enzymes than fresh fruits and vegetables. These enzymes allow your body to extract higher levels of

vitamins, minerals and other nutrients from other foods you eat in conjunction with the sprouts as well

- **Increased essential fatty acid and fiber content** — The essential fatty acid and fiber content also increases dramatically during the sprouting process. Most people do not get enough fiber or healthy fats in their diet for optimal health, and sprouts can be a great source of both
- **Increased bioavailability of minerals and protein** — When the seed starts to sprout, minerals such as calcium and magnesium bind to proteins in the seed, which makes both the minerals and the protein more readily available and usable in your body.

In addition, the proteins are altered in beneficial ways during the process of sprouting, so you get more, and higher quality, protein from sprouts compared to eating the unsprouted seed

Many say they cannot afford to eat fresh and healthy foods, but sprouts are so inexpensive, there's really no excuse for avoiding them, especially if you grow them yourself. Doing so can cut the cost by about 90 percent or more, compared to buying them.

My **Sprout Doctor Starter Kit** provides everything you need to get started, and comes with a bag each of sunflower shoots, broccoli sprouts and pea shoot seeds. When grown in soil, you can harvest your sprouts in about a week, and 1 pound of seed can produce over 10 pounds of sprouts.

Sunflower shoots will give you the most volume for your effort and, in my opinion, have the best taste. In one 10-by-10 tray, you can harvest between 1 and 2 pounds of sunflower sprouts. You can store them in the fridge for about a week. Broccoli sprouts look and taste similar to alfalfa sprouts, which most people like. They're perfect for adding to salads and sandwiches, and are especially tasty in combination with fresh avocado.

I've partnered with a company in a small town in Vermont that develops, breeds, and grows their own seeds, and are industry leaders in seed safety for sprouts and shoots. All of my seeds are non-GMO, certified organic, and packed with nutrition.

## Resources for the Urban Gardener

As growing numbers of people are becoming excited about local food, healthier eating and greener cities, there's renewed interest in the development of urban agriculture around the country.

However, it's important to educate yourself about your city (including your homeowner's association), state and federal ordinances<sup>16</sup> before you plunge your shovel into the ground. There's nothing fun about getting a citation for breaking the law.<sup>17</sup>

Zoning laws and ordinances are constantly changing, so you really need to do your due diligence in planning your urban garden. Common garden and yard care laws include:

Regulations on fence and hedge heights, and length of grass

Restrictions on front yard food gardens<sup>18</sup>

Watering requirements and limits

Regulations pertaining to the protection of wildlife

Regulations on weeds and invasive species

Farm animal ordinances, including beekeeping<sup>19</sup>

Composting ordinances

Regulations on rainwater collection

Gardening-related business activities, should you consider selling any of your products

Hell strips — This refers to the section of land between the street and the sidewalk; this land belongs to the city, but must be maintained by the homeowner; oftentimes allowed to remove or damage plants or trees growing here

A policy reference guide to community gardening can be found on [PublicHealthLawCenter.org](https://www.PublicHealthLawCenter.org). Below are a few other resources that may assist you in your quest as well. Whether you want to plant organic veggies, a berry patch, or a much larger edible landscape project, make sure you are proceeding within the legal guidelines before you start, in order to avoid major headaches down the road.

- [American Community Gardening Association \(ACGA\)](#) is devoted to community gardening and greening up communities across the U.S. and Canada
- [APA Urban Agriculture](#) offers information about urban agricultural zoning and lists a good number of government initiatives, plans and ordinances that are up for vote across the U.S.
- [Food Not Lawns](#) is a sustainability movement focused on getting rid of lawns in favor of more ecofriendly alternatives; also has chapters in nearly every state across the U.S.
- [IOBY.org](#) provides a primer on how to turn vacant lots into community gardens
- To find a municipal law lawyer to help you, see [FindLaw.com](#)

## **Take Control of Your Health by Growing Some of Your Own Food**

There is no magic bullet when it comes to aging well. Generally speaking, the better you treat your body throughout your life, the better your aging experience will be. Aches, pains, forgetfulness and loneliness are not automatic givens. You can achieve physical and psychological wellness at any age. For me, in many ways life continues to get better as the years go by.

It does require a measure of effort, however. To improve your health, you need to take proactive steps today, and every day going forward. Starting a garden, even if it's just growing a batch of sprouts on your countertop, is perhaps one of the most rewarding steps you can take that will support your health in numerous ways. And, if you keep it up, you may even find yourself enjoying the boons well into old age.