

Garden Care Sheet

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General Guidelines

It is much easier to care for your plants and your garden than you might fear. Check on your garden every day to become familiar with how your plants look, and when you are there, pull out the few small weeds that might appear. If you think something is wrong with your plants, it probably is—but don't worry! Most problems stem from a few common deficiencies: an inadequate amount of water, sun, or food (fertilizer, i.e. compost). Your plant's problem might also be caused by a pest or a disease. The best way to deal with such problems is to catch them early and combat them immediately. Check the section on your plant below for individual tips, but use common sense as well: if you see a number of caterpillars eating your plant, take them off! Or if you have deer problems, get our deer netting before they come! Or if the leaves are yellow, drooping, or wilting, then you probably need to adjust the amount of water, sun, or food. Pay attention to any changes occurring in your garden. There are many resources available to identify the source of problems. If you get stumped, contact us.

Water: Your plants need differing amounts of water, so make sure to read the descriptions below. If the instructions say to water regularly, it is best to water at least once a day during the hot part of the season, and it is best to do so in the morning so that plants can dry before the evening. Our drip irrigation systems are specially made for your raised beds and can make the watering process much easier and worry-free. Oddly shaped fruit often comes from inconsistent watering. Drooping plants are a sign of inadequate water. This may be caused by not watering frequently enough, or not watering deeply enough. Plants need water throughout their root zone, and just because the soil surface appears moist does not mean that the soil is properly watered. To make sure it is sufficiently watered, put a finger into the soil to ensure that moisture continues through all layers. Towards the end of the summer, you might want to add some mulch if it gets really hot (to help hold in the moisture).

Sun: If the section below says your plant needs full sun, that means at least eight hours a day. Other plants can tolerate as little as six hours a day. Several common signs of inadequate sun are stunted growth, yellowing leaves, lack of fruit, or elongated growth. Some plants also have problems with too much sun. To prolong the life of some cool weather plants as summer arrives, it may be necessary to provide some shade. Shade can be provided by a nearby tree, shade netting or companion plants (this is why we sometimes plant lettuce beneath tomato plants). Any of these measures will keep plants healthy for longer into the hot season. Other plants temporarily wilt when placed in their new location due to transplant shock, but will spring back to life shortly. Please consult the individual plant list for further details.

Food: Our soil is already healthy and full of organic matter, but periodically you will need to add some compost around the plants to keep providing enough nutrients. Furthermore, as plants consume nutrients from the soil, the soil is slowly depleted, making it beneficial to add compost whenever you replant your garden. If you buy one of our home composters, you can turn your household organic waste into this food. You can also use other types of vegetable fertilizer if you like. Since the sun is another type of food for the plants, the signs your plants need food are similar to the signs your plants need more sun, including stunted growth, poor fruit production, or yellowing leaves.

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Care to Your Bed: Your raised-bed garden does not need a great deal of special care to continue producing healthy, organic vegetables. However, some special care to the wood will go a long way, and will ensure you get as many productive seasons as possible. The cedar is naturally more resistant to rot, but all of the gardens will last longer if you follow these steps after each season: 1) Empty the soil from your raised bed garden, or mound it in the center so that the interior wood sides are exposed. 2) Let the wood dry, and then brush off any dirt. 3) Apply to all wood surfaces (except the bottom) a non-toxic wood preservative that is okay for contact with vegetables. You can order Tung oil from us in small quantities. 4) Let the preservative dry, and then fill up your garden or push the soil back to the edges. You do not need to worry about preserving the bottom piece—that is just a heavy duty answer to keeping out varmints, and it will do that work for some time. If you are not going to use your garden for a season, it would be best to empty it of soil and cover it up.

The individual tips below on plants are by no means exhaustive, but they should give you the basic information you need to grow healthy, tasty plants. If you want to learn more about vegetables or a variety of other topics, the Virginia Cooperative Extension Agency (funded by your tax dollars) has compiled a wealth of publications and resources specifically for Virginia. Access them at www.pubs.ext.vt.edu.

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Tomatoes

Light: Full sun. At least 8 hours a day.

Watering: Water regularly, ideally using a soaker hose or one of our drip irrigation systems. It is preferable if the water does not get on the leaves because that could cause (or help spread) disease.

Harvesting: Simply pull off a ripe tomato or cut the vine just in front of the tomato. You may also harvest green tomatoes and let them ripen in your kitchen.

Pests and Disease: Tomatoes are susceptible to a number of diseases and pests, such as fusarium wilt, verticillium wilt, nematodes, and several flies and worms (including the tomato horn worm), which you should pull off immediately if they appear. If you have Tomato Hornworms, inspect them before killing them. If they have a number of white growths protruding from them, let them be. These are the eggs of parasitic wasps that will hatch and prey on the hornworm population, fighting your pest battle for you. Most of our tomatoes are resistant to the various wilt diseases, but watch out for them—if you catch it early and do some pruning, you might be all right. Also, never smoke around tomato plants or let your smoking friends help you harvest: tobacco diseases transfer readily to tomatoes.

Special notes: For the indeterminate (vine) tomatoes, remove the suckers that appear between branches on your tomato vine." Diligently plucking suckers will limit your tomato plant to 1 or 2 vines. This technique will keep your tomato plants manageable and easy to harvest, keep them from touching the ground, allow air flow to lower the risk of disease, and will create an earlier harvest. Prune away yellowing and dead leaves—they are normal! If daytime temperatures exceed 90 degrees, or nighttime temperatures fall out of the 59-68 degree range, fruiting can be stunted or stopped. To help minimize the problem of cool nights, we keep tomato plants safe in our greenhouse until the time is right to put them in your garden. Our raised beds keep the soil warmer than the surrounding earth, but if you are still having problems on cold nights or want your plants to produce late in the season, consider purchasing one of our greenhouse attachments—coming soon!

Basil

Light: Full sun. Preferably 8 hours a day.

Watering: Water regularly.

Harvesting: You should only use the leaves in cooking, but it is good to cut back the stems regularly. If you do not, the stalks will grow too tall and gangly. Encourage bushiness by pinching back new leaves.

Pests and Disease: Fusarium wilt, aphids, and Japanese beetles.

Special notes: Make sure to cut back any flower buds that might appear. This will also help bushiness and will keep the plant from becoming too bitter. Furthermore, you can preemptively

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eliminate flowers with diligent harvesting. Flowers only form when the plant has a large number of leaves.

Oregano

Light: Full sun. Preferably 8 hours a day.

Watering: Do not over-water oregano—it is sensitive to water and the roots will rot. It is okay to let that area of the garden dry out for a little while.

Harvesting: Harvest by pruning the plant to a pair of leaves. If you harvest regularly, you can maintain the plant's size and accumulate enough for drying.

Pests and Disease: No particular problems.

Special notes: Oregano is a perennial plant, so it will come back the following year. Don't throw it away! It can be transplanted, however, if you want to move it somewhere else.

Peppers

Light: Full sun. At least 8 hours a day.

Watering: Water regularly, but it is best to use a soaker hose or one of our customized drip irrigation systems so that you do not get water on the leaves, which could invite wilt disease problems (uncommon). Peppers need average moisture.

Harvesting: Harvest the peppers when you want to eat them. Often they will change in both size and color as they grow. For the small hot peppers such as habaneros, cayenne peppers, or Chinese five color peppers you should let them change color for maximum flavor and spice. Be careful not to break the stems when you harvest; it is best to use some shears or scissors. If you leave a stem on them, they will store longer.

Pests and Disease: Wilt and fungus sometimes, but those are uncommon.

Special notes: You might need to put a cage or a support of some kind if your pepper plant gets too big. Build your own or call us! Night temperatures over 75 degrees might stunt fruit production. Peppers freeze great and are perfect in pickles and relishes.

Eggplant

Light: Full sun, and we're not kidding. Eggplant loves the sun. 8 hours a day at the very least.

Watering: Water regularly, taking special care to maintain even moisture while the fruit is developing. Otherwise you might get some strangely shaped eggplant.

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Harvesting: Cut off the fruit with shears before it turns from a bright glossy color to a dull color. Do not try to pull the fruit or twist it off, as it might damage the plant.

Pests and Disease: verticillium wilt, cutworms and flea beetles.

Special notes: As with peppers, eggplants might need additional support such as cages. Build your own or call us!

Okra

Light: Full sun.

Watering: Water regularly, and do not let the soil dry out completely.

Harvesting: Do not wait too long to harvest the pods! About three or four inches at most is perfect. Otherwise the pods become so tough they are inedible. Use shears or scissors to cut the pods from the plant; do not try to pull them off as you might damage the plant.

Pests and Disease: various wilt diseases, aphids, and cabbage worms.

Special notes: Okra needs heat to thrive, so once it starts getting cooler, it's best to move on to the next crop.

Cucumbers

Light: Full sun.

Watering: As you might suspect from the flesh of a cucumber, cucumbers need a lot of water. You should never let the soil dry out completely, but try to avoid getting the leaves wet, as this can spread fungal problems.

Harvesting: Use shears to cut the cucumbers from the vine. Do not pull them off, or you might damage the plant. It is important to harvest cucumbers before they get too big or yellow, so watch them closely; otherwise they might taste bitter and have large holes in the center.

Pests and Disease: mildew, wilt diseases, and beetles.

Special notes: Most cucumber plants are vine plants and need to be trained up through the trellis. Do this carefully so as not to damage the plant. Misshapen cucumbers are often a sign of uneven watering.

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Squash

Light: Full sun.

Watering: Keep average, regular moisture, but try to keep the leaves dry to avoid mildew production.

Harvesting: Be careful not to damage the squash, and remove it by cutting off the stem (not the vine) when they are about 6-8 inches long. Remove old fruit if you were gone for a while to allow the new fruit to produce.

Pests and Disease: squash bugs and powdery mildew.

Special notes: Squash does best on the trellis, so make sure to train it carefully through the netting and keep it off the ground.

Lettuce

(also relevant to Arugula and Sorrel)

Light: Partial-Full Sun

Watering: Keep them well watered. These leafy greens are composed mostly of water. Their water content and relatively shallow root system mean that these plants do very poorly without diligent watering.

Harvesting: With leaf lettuce (oakleaf and red deer tongue for our purposes) arugula and sorrel, when to harvest is more or less up to you. Whenever the leaf looks tastiest, go ahead and pick. For heading lettuce (sweet valentine and tennis ball), there is nothing wrong with picking at any point, but there is something inherently glorious in waiting until you can pick an aesthetically pleasing head. With all types, it is important to pick before the weather gets too hot in the summer. These leafy greens "bolt" when it gets too hot. This means they grow very tall and begin to produce seeds. During this process they become bitter and much less desirable. When it gets hot, get some shade cloth (coming soon in accessories!), plant just behind some shade-producing tomatoes or squash, or get eating.

Pests and Disease: Aphids and every four-legged creature of the field and forest. Aphids are attracted to plants that don't receive a balanced diet. An excessive amount of nitrogen (usually from chemical fertilizers) makes greens very attractive to aphids and limits their defenses. Our soil mix will prevent this problem. Furthermore, aphids have a variety of predators. Lady bugs and lace wings can devour a population of aphids in minutes. We offer beneficial flower planting that will help to attract these garden defenders.

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Special Notes: Most people think of growing greens in the spring, but with a few simple implements, you can produce lettuce all year. Shade cloth and plenty of water in the summer can help you keep producing. A fall planting can provide lettuce well into the fall, and most greens will survive freezing temperatures down to the low twenties or high teens. With a little luck and our plastic greenhouse add on (coming soon!), your greens can survive all winter.

Greens

(Kale, Collards, Chard)

Light: Partial-Full Sun

Watering: These tougher greens have stronger root systems than the greens above. They should be watered a few times a week during dry periods.

Harvesting: For kale and collards, wait until the plant has grown large for optimal harvest. For fall plantings, the flavor is improved by a freeze. During freezing, starches in the leaves are converted to sugars, making the plant milder and more flavorful. For Swiss chard, harvesting works by cutting some and then cutting some more later. Harvest the greens from your chard, leaving a stump or stem protruding above the soil. From this developed root system, new leaves emerge, providing multiple harvests from one planting.

Pests and Disease: Aphids, various critters. Once again, a healthy plant is much better at defending itself, and a healthy ecosystem of insects will help to control insect pests. The best way to deal with critters is to purchase our deer netting kit. Also, the longer you spend with your garden, the more your scent will linger, keeping animals away. For added affect, leave a little of yourself around the garden. Hair and smelly old shoes are particularly effective.

Special Notes: For all of these greens, harvest them while young and tender for salads, or allow them to grow larger for cooking greens.

Peas

Light: Full Sun

Watering: Peas will also be fine with only supplemental watering. Water during dry periods.

Harvesting: Shelling peas—allow the peas to fill out so that the pods have a full appearance for optimal taste. Harvest frequently. Snow peas: Don't allow them to fill out quite as fully. For these peas, you will also be eating the pod, so there is less of a need to allow the peas to develop. Sugar Snap Peas: Harvest when the peas are semi-mature. You should have no trouble

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sampling to find your own optimal ripeness. Pick frequently (every other day) to encourage productivity and to ensure the tastiest peas.

Pests and Disease: As long as peas are planted early in the season, diseases and pests are at a minimum. Growing them on a trellis encourages good air flow and further limits problems.

Special Notes: Growing these plants vertically increases productivity exponentially and makes the peas much easier to find. For a special gourmet treat, try eating the pea tendrils in your salads.

Fruit Trees

We will plant your trees at the correct depth and spacing, but you will want to watch them as they grow to ensure their health. For the first season, you will want to make sure to keep them well watered so that they become established. Also for the first season in particular, and the next couple of years, watch to see if they need to be staked to grow in the right direction; this is not difficult to determine. If you think they are leaning too far, then they are. Stake them yourself, or call us.

You also want to make sure the bottoms of the trees remain protected from rabbits and other such animals, which might damage the lower foot of the tree. We will install guards to help prevent this problem, but look for chew marks or similar damage.

Pruning is not crucial for the first few years, but you will want to remove any damaged limbs, or any limbs that cross or tangle together. Prune the limbs back to the trunk or a split. This should be done in early spring.

To get the best and most fruit possible, thin the fruits after the flowers have fallen. For trees with clusters, remove at least one fruit from the cluster.

Vines

The different vines and small fruits (blueberries, blackberries, grapes, kiwi, etc.) require a number of different considerations, and some books and experts can make the fertilizing and pruning processes sound very complicated. But they're really not—and they can be fun. Few tasks are as rewarding and meditative as pruning your grape vines in the early winter.

Not much needs to be done to your vines the first year, but make sure to water them heavily and regularly, especially after installation. You might also want to mulch around them to help keep down the weeds and retain moisture. We will bring you a separate publication for each different vine when we install them for you.