



### Why grow vegetables?

What can I say to the enthusiastic cook who is vaguely interested in the idea of growing his or her own vegetables but is still teetering on the brink of action? Realistically, for most of us these days there are no persuasive economic arguments for growing your own vegetables – at least, not if you cost out your time. (During summer gluts, my father used to pay me pocket money to pick and freeze peas, beans and soft fruits from his vegetable garden. He once calculated that the resulting frozen produce cost him three or four times what it would in the supermarket. And that was without factoring in his own time.)

But there is still an important sense in which the vegetables you grow yourself really are free. When your time is given freely, what you make with it is free in the best sense of the word. When you buy your vegetables, you are a slave – to the car that takes you to the shops; to the methods, good and bad, by which the vegetables are produced; to the market forces, and the big bosses who fix the prices; to the shelf-stacking policies that determine the freshness, or otherwise, of the produce you buy. You have no say whatsoever in the means of production, no role in the quality of what becomes yours only when you hand over the cash.

Grow your own vegetables and all that changes. Choose the seeds, the growing site, the time to plant, to weed, to water, to feed, to harvest. What you then take to the kitchen is not just a vegetable, it's a form of self-expression, an assertion of personal liberty. It's a kind of opting out of the world as you're told it must be in favour of the world as you'd like it to be. You may doubt the wisdom of loading something as ordinary as a carrot with such deep personal meaning. But try growing them yourself, and you will find that carrots are far from ordinary. They are sleek, pointed, orange miracles that come from nowhere to populate a bare patch of earth. And, almost astonishingly, you can eat them!

The fact is, those who already grow their own vegetables for the kitchen need no converting to the cause. I have yet to meet a vegetable gardener who complained that 'it's hardly worth it, what with the choice available in the supermarket these

days', or 'it's too much time for too little reward', or 'what's the point, you can hardly taste the difference anyway?' These quotations are the clichés of the uninitiated – those who do not yet know the prickly heat of a fat radish freshly drawn from the earth, washed with a quick wipe on a dewy tuft of grass, then eaten without further ado; those who have not tasted the extra sugar dose in a pile of self-podded peas thrown into boiling water within an hour of being picked; those who have not marvelled at the unrepentant earthiness of freshly dug potatoes ...

If you are still wavering, let me offer you another, almost glib answer to the question, 'why grow vegetables?' Because you can. I mean, anyone can. As I said earlier, growing vegetables is easy. All you need is earth and seeds. Sunshine and water are important too, but in a reasonable year both should come in plentiful supply, courtesy of the man upstairs. A relaxed, *laissez-faire* attitude to growing vegetables will stand the beginner in good stead. While there is plenty of scope for fussing and fretting about your vegetable patch, you will probably find that obsessional attention to detail either does or doesn't evolve as the years go by, according to your personality. In other words, if you want to become the manic overseer of a manicured vegetable plot, you can; but it doesn't have to start off that way.

### Starting a vegetable garden

Some thought is required in choosing your patch of ground. All gardeners have to compromise, and while a south-facing, level piece of land, sheltered from the worst of the wind, with a rich, finely textured soil will get you off to a flying start, few of us are blessed with such perfect growing conditions. It's more a question of avoiding negative factors. Light is vital, and a patch that is in near-permanent shade is simply not going to work. It's important, therefore, to be aware of the passage of the sun across your intended growing site from dawn till dusk. If the ground enjoys direct sunlight for more than half of daylight hours (that's about four in mid-winter, eight on the longest day), you should be able to grow well on it. It's worth bearing in mind that you may be able to gain extra sunlight for your patch by cutting down an unfortunately located tree or two. This takes a bit of courage, and there's no point in breaking your heart by sacrificing a beloved feature of your garden for an extra row of peas. But trees are not sacred just because they are big. And of course there's the firewood bonus.

As far as the timing of your bed-creation scheme goes, you have two choices: late autumn for planting the following spring, or early spring for almost immediate planting. An autumn digging will give the soil a chance to settle and leaves time for existing green matter, such as grass tufts and the usual weeds, to rot down. The winter months ahead will allow this to happen without too many new weeds springing up. However, you will have to be on your toes come spring, as the weed seeds in the ground will leap at the first chance they get to germinate and take hold. Another good going over in early March will be essential if you don't want to be back to square one. If you're opting for spring digging, you may as well wait until it's almost time to start planting: say early April. Dig over your patch, removing all the grass and weeds you can, and simply work over your soil till it is nicely broken up and ready for planting.

From *The River Cottage Cookbook* by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

For these questions.

- 1 What did the author's father use to pay him to do?  
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- 2 What is meant by 'teetering on the brink of action' (line 3)?  
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- 3-5 List and explain three reasons why the author suggests it is not good to buy vegetables.  
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- 6 Which vegetable does the author use to inspire vegetable growers?  
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- 7 Who needs no converting to the vegetable-growing cause?  
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- 8 Does the author believe growing vegetables is easy or hard? \_\_\_\_\_
- 9-11 Which four key things do you need to grow vegetables? Explain why.  
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- 12 Describe what is meant by a '*laissez-faire* attitude' on line 41.  
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- 13 What is the meaning of the word 'compromise' (line 50) in this context?  
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- 14 Why has the author described the trees as 'unfortunately located' (line 59)?  
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15-17 Find three examples from the passage conveying the author's passion for growing vegetables.

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18-20 The next subtitle in the author's book is 'Preparing for sowing'. Write three things the author might cover under this heading.

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