



Can a Vegetable Garden Save Money?

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With today's tight economy, everyone is looking for ways to cut expenses. Growing a garden has the potential to reduce the amount of money spent on groceries. But this "potential" depends on the costs involved in growing the crops, types and amounts of vegetables grown, yields that are derived from the garden, and other factors. So, the answer to the above question is "yes" – if done correctly.

It's possible to spend a small fortune on a garden. The humorous book, "The \$64 Tomato" by William Alexander, discusses one man's quest for the perfect garden and how it ended up costing him \$64 per tomato (among other things). This astonishing figure is the result of all of the input costs (tools and equipment, fertilizers, pesticides, water, etc.) associated with gardening. These costs can add up quickly, even for a small vegetable garden. The trick to saving money with a vegetable garden is limiting the costs while maximizing yield.

While saving money may be one of the benefits to growing a vegetable garden – let's not forget that there are others as well. Gardens are a potential means to increase our confidence in food safety and security. We know where the food is coming from and all the history of plants grown in our own gardens. We know what chemicals were used, we know what pests were problems and we essentially eliminated the whole resource-gobbling transportation chain to get the food to your plate. And all that gardening is good for you. It is a great form of physical exercise, and I haven't met a nutritionist yet who didn't think that fresh produce was "good for you" too!

So, growing your own vegetables can be rewarding, regardless of the potential savings. But with a few tips, it can save you some money on a grocery bill or two. First – you have to know a couple of basics of growing vegetables.

Vegetable Growing Basics

There are a wide variety of vegetables that can be successfully grown in Iowa. As I walk through the produce section of my grocery store, there are only a few things I see that are difficult to grow in Iowa. The location of the vegetable garden is crucial. Nearly all vegetables need full-sun and a well-drained soil. The vegetable garden also should be located near a source of water.

Iowa's climate allows production of both cool and warm season vegetables.

Cool season vegetables (carrots, beets, lettuce, cauliflower, etc.) are planted in early spring and harvested by mid-summer. Warm season vegetables (tomatoes, pepper, eggplant, squash, etc.) are planted after the danger of frost has passed and harvested by early fall. With proper planning, it's possible to grow two or three crops in a given area during the growing season. Using the same space for two or more crops is called succession planting. Other techniques, such as interplanting and companion planting, are other ways to make efficient use of garden space. The more efficiently you use garden space and resources the larger the potential savings.

Below are several other important factors to consider when growing a vegetable garden to save you money.

Select vegetables that you like. This is simple – you're not likely to take care of ...or eat things you don't like. So don't waste your time or money planting them in the garden.

Select vegetables that can be easily stored or preserved. Selecting vegetables that have a long storage life or that can easily be canned or frozen is a great way to stretch your grocery dollar. Potatoes, onions, sweet potatoes,

and winter squash can be stored for several months when stored at the appropriate temperature. Other vegetables, like beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, beets and sweet corn, can be preserved by canning or freezing. Preserving vegetables is a great way to enjoy the “extra” produce later in the year.

Select vegetables that are expensive to buy in the grocery store. To save money, grow more expensive items, like tomatoes and melons, or large quantities of vegetables that you purchase regularly. Consider vegetables like beans, beets, onions, spinach, broccoli, peppers, carrots, summer squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, peas, and Swiss chard. These vegetables provide the biggest returns on your investment of space and time in the garden.

Do some research and start with a plan. Decide what you want to grow and determine what will be necessary to be successful. Plan the garden on paper first. Establish a network of family members, neighbors, or friends that can help you answer your questions. Don't forget about your local county extension office. There are more than 20 vegetable gardening publications from Iowa State University Extension that can help you (see table below). Each of these can be picked up at your county extension office. They can also be ordered or downloaded online at www.extension.iastate.edu/store. County extension offices are also the meeting centers for Master Gardeners – many of whom have the knowledge and experience to keep your garden growing successfully.

Research and consider ways to reduce your inputs. Collect rainwater for irrigation. Add compost and well-rotted manure to the garden to improve the soil and reduce the use of fertilizers. Practice the principles of Integrated Pest Management to control insects and diseases, reducing your reliance on pesticides. Start with high quality seeds – most are relatively inexpensive, and most can be stored for at least one or two years. Find ways to reuse containers, flats, stakes, ties, etc. Remember that saving money with vegetables usually means keeping the costs as low as possible while still growing productive plants.

Start small. Like many things, gardening takes practice. Plants will require regular watering, maintenance and harvesting. Growing many different vegetables in a large garden can be overwhelming for new gardeners and can ultimately lead to failure. Limit yourself to just a few types of vegetables the first year. When you become more confident in your abilities and resources, you can increase the size of your vegetable garden and grow a wider variety of crops.

Finally, have fun growing your own vegetables. Encourage your neighbors to grow a few vegetables as well. Visit each other's gardens and trade “extra produce” regularly. It's surprising how something as simple as a vegetable garden can impact your life...and hopefully your pocketbook as well!

Iowa State University Extension publications on growing vegetables in home gardens area available from county ISU Extension offices or online at www.extension.iastate.edu/store/.

The following list includes identification number, the title of the publication, number of pages and cost:

Pm 994, *Asparagus in the Home Garden*, 4 pages, 50 cents
RG 801, *Basil*, 2 pages, single copy free
Pm 1893, *Cilantro*, 2 pages, 50 cents
Pm 1896, *Cole Crops*, 3 pages, 50 cents
Pm 870B, *Container Vegetable Gardening*, 2 pages, 50 cents
Pm 1894, *Garlic*, 2 pages, 50 cents
Pm 731, *Harvesting and Storing Vegetables*, 8 pages, \$1
RG 201, *Integrated Pest Management for Vegetable Gardens*, 2 pages, single copy free
Pm 1889, *Onions*, 2 pages, 50 cents
Pm 1888, *Peppers*, 4 pages, 50 cents
Pm 819, *Planting a Home Vegetable Garden*, 4 pages, 50 cents
Pm 534, *Planting and Harvesting Times for Garden Vegetables*, 2 pages, 50 cents
Pm 1890, *Potatoes*, 3 pages, 50 cents
Pm 870A, *Small Plot Vegetable Gardens*, 2 pages, 50 cents
Pm 874, *Starting Garden Transplants at Home*, 4 pages, 50 cents
Pm 607, *Suggested Vegetable Varieties for the Home Garden*, 4 pages, 50 cents
Pm 1891, *Sweet Corn*, 4 pages, 50 cents
Pm 1895, *Tomatillos*, 2 pages, 50 cents
Pm 1266, *Tomato Diseases and Disorders*, 12 pages, \$3.25
Pm 608, *Tomatoes*, 4 pages, 0.50 cents
Pm 823, *Watering the Home Garden – Use of Trickle Irrigation*, 4 pages, \$1
Pm 814, *Where to Put Your Vegetable Garden*, 2 pages, 50 cents