Can you save money by growing your own vegetables and fruits?

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.

Though saving money may not be the only reason you want to plant a garden, you also get some “fringe” benefits like getting physical exercise, knowing where the food is coming from, what chemicals were used, the confidence in food safety and security, and the convenience of the food being just outside your door. I always enjoy having a garden, whether it’s a traditional garden plot in the backyard or several pots and containers. No matter what your garden space is, growing your own produce can be rewarding.

A wide variety of vegetables can be successfully grown in Iowa. Nearly all vegetables need adequate sunshine, water, fertilizer and a well-drained growing medium to flourish successfully. 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. The more efficiently you use garden space and resources, the larger the potential savings.

Cindy Haynes, Extension Horticulturist, with Iowa State University offers the following tips on making a successful garden.

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 and winter squash can be stored for several months when stored at the appropriate temperature. 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. Contact your county extension office for updated home food preservation resources.

Select vegetables that are expensive to buy in the grocery store. 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 plan the garden on paper first. There are more than 20 vegetable gardening publications from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach that are available at your county extension office or check online at www.extension.iastate.edu/store. To maximize your savings, consider ways to reduce your costs, such as collecting rainwater for irrigation, using compost to improve the soil and reduce the use of fertilizers, share seeds with a neighbor or family member, and reuse containers, flats, stakes, ties, etc.

Start small. 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 garden and grow a wider variety of crops.

Have fun. 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!


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