

<http://www.hamptonsvue.com/At-Home/Garden-Thymes/97/Best-Way-To-Start-A-Garden-Is-To-Well---Dig-In.html>

## **Best Way To Start A Garden Is To -- Uhhh, Dig In**

By Jerry Cimisi | Updated April 29, 2010



With work and attention a bountiful garden is more than attainable. Start small and branch out if you've got the space and time.

**East Hampton** - It's spring and you've finally decided this year you're going to plant a garden, especially the kind that returns a bit of harvest to your table. And because it's for your table, you want to go the organic route.

How to get started?



Organic gardening can open up a new relationship with growing food.

Patty Gentry was a cook at the Ross School in East Hampton for four years. She made the transition from preparing food to growing it, and also selling her harvest. She runs the organic Early Girl Farm in East Moriches.

She offers this advice: "Find an area where for most of the day you get full sun exposure. And figure out how much time you have to take care of it. It's better to start small, and care for fewer plants, keep them well maintained. You can always expand your growing area if you want to. A few well maintained plants actually give you a greater yield. As you harvest from a plant that encourages it to grow more. If you let a plant put all its energy into one giant fruit, it won't put its resources to growing more."

In regards to planting time, sun versus shade, and harvest time, she added, "The instructions on the seed packets are usually pretty good. Just follow them."



Starting your plants from seeds has its own special rewards. Photo by C. Bellini

Is it hard to keep down pests, such as potato beetles and squash borers if you go organic?

Gentry said, "It's work, but it's not as hard as you might think. The best herbicide is your two hands. If you keep down the weeds early you'll be all right. Basically I use a stirrup hoe and a wheel hoe. If the rows are wide enough apart, a rototiller."

Companion gardening, in which certain plants (such as marigolds) that repel many insects, are planted near crops, is another method of keeping plants pest-free.

Pulverized chrysanthemum flowers contain pyrethrum, which attacks the nervous system of insects, and also prevents female mosquitoes from biting. There are many commercial brands of pyrethrum available.



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Eve Kapla-Walbrecht, of Garden of Eve in Riverhead, and president of the Long Island Growers Group of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association, agrees. "Hand

picking" is the best organic remedy for pests and it should be practiced early on. "Keep pests down in the spring, and you'll have a lot less problem in the summer." She related that clove oil is also a good herbicide, and that corn gluten is great for lawns.

Both Gentry and Kaplan-Walbrecht stressed the use of good compost. "It's the first thing I recommend," said Kaplan. "Good compost and healthy plants are more than half the battle."

Gardeners who buy starter plants from stores have to be careful. "In most cases these plants have been raised in conditions that are not natural, not what conditions will be outside, in your garden," Kaplan-Walbrecht cautions. "A lot of them are forced, to get a larger plant, and in a container that becomes too small relative to the size of the plant. These plants might be fine in April to buy, but when they are still in the store a month later, there's a problem. When the roots hit the edge of the container they tell the plant to stop growing. Even when you transplant them into the ground this 'message' can stay in effect for a while. The plants don't grow as well, and gardeners feel at fault, when in fact the plants were not healthy to begin with."



As Patty Gentry aptly puts it, "We are supposed to be able to feed

ourselves. Nature wants us to succeed at gardening.'

Gardeners should try plants that are easier to grow, for instance, lettuce as opposed to melons. "From when it first sprouts to getting a head of lettuce can be a month," said Kaplan-Walbrecht, "and you can keep getting lettuce from the same plant throughout the growing season. Melons, and, say, pumpkins, need a certain amount of warmth and they need to sit in the garden for a long time."

This is a problem with tomatoes, peppers and eggplants, the favorites of many gardeners. These plants are usually started indoors in the northeast, and should not be planted outside until well into May. The containers they are growing in may need to be changed to larger ones before outdoor planting.

Though they can be started from seed, directly in the ground, in May. This writer did that a number of years with tomatoes, and enjoyed great yields from mid August into October.

Patty Gentry summed up her feelings about gardening. "It's more than just rewarding. It's our birthright as human beings. We are supposed to be able to feed ourselves. Nature wants us to succeed at gardening."