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Groceries from the Backyard: A Harvest of Savings

The economy is tanking, grocery bills are climbing and food safety scares are on the rise. For the 43 million Americans planning a vegetable garden this year, growing your own is a matter of dollars and sense.

Food gardening will jump 19 percent this year over last year, according to a new survey by the National Gardening Association (NGA). Homeowners with shrinking household budgets are looking for help in their own backyards. Can planting a veggie patch really save you money?

Every \$100 spent on vegetable gardening yields \$1,000 to \$1,700 worth of produce, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates. That's a serious hedge against skyrocketing food prices, expected to jump another 5 percent this year.

You'll get a half-pound of edibles from every square foot of ground devoted to backyard crops, NGA experts say. Even a modest garden (15 by 15 feet) can produce more than 100 pounds of garden-fresh tomatoes, salad greens, vegetables and herbs. Better flavor and bragging rights come with the harvest.

Planting a vegetable plot and keeping it productive isn't that hard if you start small, keep the basics in mind and plant reliable varieties. Take it step by step:

Lead with Location: A sunny, well-drained spot close to a water spigot is ideal. Leafy greens tolerate some shade, but other crops want eight hours of sun daily.

Suitable Soil: Adding organic material is the key to an easy-care garden. It loosens stiff soil, helps retain moisture and nourishes important soil organisms. Good "ingredients" include manure, humus and chopped-up leaves. Spread a 4-inch layer of amendments on your plot and till into the top 9 to 12 inches.

Fertilize Faithfully: All edible plants remove some nutrients from the soil, and can quickly exhaust the soil without the help of a fertilizer. Always follow the rates given on the label when deciding how much to use.

Water Wisely: One inch of water weekly is adequate for most vegetables. Soaker hoses or drip systems deliver water efficiently and keep foliage dry, fending off leaf diseases.

Patrol for Pests: Monitor insect damage but try to keep your crops pesticide-free. Hand-pick pests or dislodge them with a jet of water, then let natural predators do the rest. If you must spray, do it late in the day when beneficial insects are less active.

Pick the Right Plants: Flower gardeners gravitate to the newest, showiest varieties, but smart food gardeners appreciate the tried-and-true. For best results you'll need to choose veggie and herb varieties suitable to your geographical location.

If you're ready to try your hand at creating your own backyard grocery garden, here are 10 easy crops to plant:

- (1) Basil: Perfect with tomatoes. Choose sweet basil or the compact "Spicy Globe."
- (2) Beans: Bush beans like "Bush Blue Lake" are easier to pick, but tall "pole" beans have higher yields.
- (3) Bell peppers: Harvest green or red, when vitamin levels are higher. Try "Bonnie Bell" or the new, hot bell pepper "Mexibell."
- (4) Chard: This leafy green tolerates cool temperatures well. Varieties like "Bright Lights" have brilliantly colored stems.
- (5) Cucumber: Plant after the weather warms. Choose the mild Japanese cucumber or the old favorite "Burpless Bush Hybrid."
- (6) Eggplant: A much-loved favorite, eggplant thrives in hot weather. Try "Black Beauty" or the white-skinned "Cloud Nine."
- (7) Lettuce: Go for easy "leaf" lettuces like "Buttercrunch," "Red Sails," or Romaine.
- (8) Parsley: Pick curly types or flat Italian parsley. This herb is rich in vitamins and a breath-sweetener, too.
- (9) Summer squash: Squash are very productive plants and easy to grow. Try zucchini "Black Beauty" or yellow crook-necked squash.
- (10) Tomatoes: These crimson favorites are the most popular backyard vegetable. Choose disease-resistant "Better Boy" or the extra-easy cherry tomato "Sweet 100."

For additional gardening tips and more herb and vegetable varieties, visit www.bonnieplants.com.

*Bonnie Plants, available coast to coast, are time-tested varieties selected to suit regional conditions. Because Bonnie's varieties are distributed regionally, you will automatically have suitable varieties available to you at retail locations in your area.

*Look for Bonnie Plants in eco-friendly biodegradable pots that not only keep tons of plastic pots from ending up in landfills, but also reduce transplant shock. Just tear off the bottom, set the pot in the ground and water.