Home Grown

Nothing beats fruits and veggies fresh from your garden for top-notch nutrition, plus a host of other health benefits.

June 6, 2016 By Gerrie E. Summers

For backyard gardeners, there is nothing like walking outside in the early morning to pick crisp heads of lettuce or ripe tomatoes and bright yellow peppers straight from the vine. This is what inspired Erin Leigh, a mom in Miami, Florida, to grow a garden in her backyard. “I relished the idea of having a vegetable and herb garden that I could simply walk through and pick ripe produce from to cook or store for later,” she says.

While there is no inherent difference between the nutrients in homegrown and store-bought produce, there are key benefits to growing your own organic fruits and vegetables. “The biggest advantage I think homegrown produce has over store-bought is the chance to eat these foods at the peak of ripeness, with no transportation or storage time to diminish their nutritional value,” says Robyn Flipse, MS, MA, a registered dietitian and nutritionist.

In addition, growing your own produce might even give your fruits and vegetables an extra nutritional boost. Whether plants are started with the same seed variety or soil quality, how much water and sunlight they receive, the degree of ripeness when harvested, the storage time and conditions, and the preparation method used before eating can all affect their nutrient content, Flipse explains.

Another advantage to home gardening, when done the right way, is that you know what you’re getting. But Flipse, a backyard gardener for more than 30 years, warns there are a few things to consider, because “maintaining a garden can be a demanding hobby.” Growing produce at home can ensure that it’s fresh and free of chemicals, but growing organic fruits and vegetables might not necessarily be less expensive than purchasing them at a grocery store, if that factors into your decision. “Make a realistic assessment of how large a plot you can take on and how much it will cost to supply the seeds, water, fertilizer, weed, pest controls, stakes, netting and other supplies,” she suggests.

“One of the things that I always try to encourage people to do is to start small, and sometimes the best place to start is by planting in containers,” says Savanah Williams.

Like Flipse, Williams is a gardening veteran who has been growing produce on her Virginia farm for more than 30 years. “Just make sure the containers have holes in the bottom that the water can

go through," she continues.

Williams started gardening when she was a child. "I grew up in a rural area, so people grew their food," she explains. "Even when I lived in urban areas, I would sometimes have plants on my windowsill."

Flipse also suggests that first-time gardeners "start with a few windowsill herb pots or outside containers to see if they enjoy the whole gardening process and to get a better understanding of their local rainfall, sunlight and other growing conditions."

"The first rule is always plant what you want to eat," Williams notes. "It's better to start with something that you really like. If you're going to grow things organically or naturally, you have to start with the seeds or the transplants being natural or organic because they don't change in the soil."

In addition, because not all regions are suitable for certain produce and plants, you need to find out what grows best in your area. If you plan to plant directly in the soil in your yard, you should have the soil tested. "You're not only testing soil for its nutritional value but to see if there are harmful chemicals that may have been there before, such as lead, or any dumped materials that people deposited there in the past," Williams says. This is why she always encourages people to "start with buckets or tubs because you have more control and you can start with good soil."

Flipse suggests growing crops you and your family enjoy that will reward you with good yields. For example, she says, "Getting dozens of cherry tomatoes from one potted plant on the corner of the deck is a good deal if you like tomatoes. But getting one or two pumpkins from a vine that takes up half your yard is not a good return."

You should "only grow as much as you can eat or trade for other crops," Flipse continues. "It is not cost effective to grow food you must give or toss away because you can't eat it all."

When Leigh decided to try gardening, she installed a raised garden bed. "I purchased a few tomato plants, a jalapeño plant and organic garden soil and compost from my local home improvement store," she says. "Since it was my first attempt, I really wanted to test my green thumb and see if I could grow organic vegetables. I was pleased with the results and definitely learned some do's and don'ts along the way."

In addition, learn about companion planting. "I call it 'courting' because you have to court people to know if they're really compatible with you," Williams says with a laugh. "For instance, marigolds and basil help tomatoes grow. I always encourage first-time gardeners to get the book A-Z of Companion Planting by Pamela Allardice and Sue Ninham. Decide what you're going to plant, and see what kinds of foods don't make a good couple. It's that kind of awareness that you have to have. Sometimes you're in a relationship with the wrong person, and that's the way it is with plants."

Do your homework, Flipse stresses. "Watch gardening videos on YouTube, talk to the folks at the

garden center where you buy your supplies and find fellow gardeners in your neighborhood or workplace to share tips and get answers to your questions," she says.

When Williams first started out, she always sought out people who knew more than she did about gardening. Rather than starting without any guidance, she'd spend time in a community where people were willing to help her learn. One idea is to join a local gardening group. "Consider a community garden plot if you're new to gardening so you can learn from more experienced gardeners and share in the group harvest," Flipse suggests.

Another home gardening aficionado, Lillian Summers (my sister), has experimented with seeds from a young age. While she didn't do much research before starting her backyard garden, Lillian joined a community garden where she learned a lot about gardening from members "who are doing the reading I never did," she says. One mistake she made was not testing the soil and later finding out that it contained lead. Lillian now attends workshops at botanical gardens, where she often gets free plants and seedlings.

Get your family involved, Leigh advises. Her son, Cameron, loves helping in the garden. "At the time I planted my first crop, his preschool was growing a vegetable garden as a teaching tool, so it wasn't difficult to get him involved," she says. "Since he doesn't mind getting into the dirt, he helps me with planting and watering the crops. He likes to check on the plants with me and count the number of tomatoes growing. His favorite part of gardening is finding ripe tomatoes and pinching them from the vine."

What if you have kids, but not enough space in your backyard or balcony for a plot? "Start off with a raised garden bed or a few potted vegetables," Leigh suggests. "Children are naturally curious at a young age, and that's a great way to get them to learn where food comes from and how easy it can be to grow your own. What's more, having a veggie garden may help kids be more open-minded about wanting to give vegetables a try."

But there are also rewards far beyond piquing youngsters' interest in trying a taste of funny-looking veggies or fruits growing in their parents' gardens. "It isn't just about getting the food; working in nature has many other benefits," Flipse says.

The gifts gardening offers are indeed numerous. Findings show that this physically demanding activity promotes healthy cholesterol and blood pressure levels and improves flexibility and the ability to recover from illness, injury and mental fatigue. In addition, gardening can reduce stress, induce a better outlook on life and provide a boost to our energy and productivity.

Now, how does your garden grow?

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